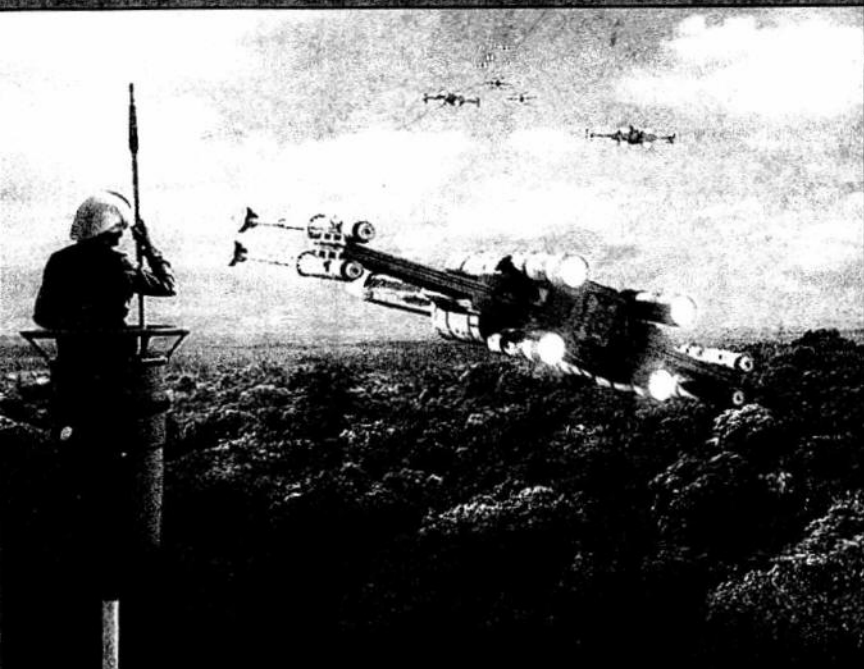


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Featuring an original Mara Jade story
by Timothy Zahn

For use with the Star Wars Roleplaying Game

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JADE SOLITAIRE

By Timothy Zahn

Illustrations by Matt Busch

"Excuse me, folks—I'm looking for Talon Karrde."

Mara Jade looked up from the engine monitor, peripherally aware that, on the other side of the board, Chin was doing the same. The voice coming from the direction of the *Wild Karrde's* bridge door was completely unfamiliar to her.

As, she discovered, was the face that came with the voice. "Captain Karrde isn't here at the moment," Mara told the stranger, eyeing him narrowly. Just because they were in a familiar docking bay in a familiar port was no reason why strangers should be wandering loose around the ship. "How did you get in here?"

The man waved vaguely behind him. "Oh, Dankin was back at the hatchway, and he let me in. Karrde and I are old friends—he and I

go way back. Any idea when he'll be showing up?"

"I really couldn't say," Mara said, throwing a glance at Chin. Someone who went way back with Karrde should logically go way back with Chin, too, given how long the older man had been with the organization. But there was no recognition on Chin's face, either. "If you'd like, you can leave a message."

The man sighed deeply. "No, I'm afraid that won't do." He waved toward the viewport behind them and the bustling spaceport scene beyond it.

Abruptly, the back of Mara's neck tingled with subtle warning. Her right hand dropped to the blaster holstered at her side—

And froze there. The intruder's waving hand had abruptly split open down the middle, revealing the blaster that had been hidden inside the prosthetic shell. "And I don't have time to wait for him, either," he said, his voice as unconcerned as ever. "My employer would like a word with all of you. He'd prefer you arrive undamaged, but he'd understand if that's not possible."



Mara hissed softly between her teeth. On her own, she knew, she could take him easily, trick weapon or no. But she wasn't alone, and Chin didn't move nearly as fast as he used to. And whether by accident or design, the intruder's weapon was pointed squarely at the older man. No, better to find out what this mysterious employer wanted and wait for a better opening. "I'd hate to disappoint him," she said, lifting her hand away from her holster. "Especially after such a gracious invitation. Please; lead on."

Though if he had harmed any of the *Wild Karrde's* crew getting inside, she promised herself darkly, her cooperation would be coming to a quick end. A painfully quick end.



Fortunately for him, he hadn't.

"Sorry, Mara," Dankin apologized, looking rather sheepish as he and the rest of the crew piled out of the group of black-windowed landspeeders in which their captors had brought them here. "They got the drop on us at the hatchway."

"Don't worry about it," Mara said, glancing around as they were herded toward the side door of an ornate and well-guarded mansion. No indication as to who the owner was or even exactly where they were, though from the sounds of spacecraft in the distance they probably weren't more than a few kilometers from the spaceport. "Let's see what all this is about. We can always get annoyed about it later."

They were ushered through the front door, up a staircase, and along a corridor to a huge office whose luxury level left the rest of the mansion in the dust. A group of chairs had been set up facing a massive desk that looked to be nearly half the size of the *Wild Karrde's* entire bridge.

And seated behind the desk, peering at them like a meat-buyer assessing a passing herd of brualki, was a large, heavily-built man. "Thank you for coming," he said, his voice penetrating the distance without giving any impression that he was even pushing the limits of his volume. "Please be seated."

"Your invitation was hard to ignore," Mara told him, choosing the chair directly in front of him and sitting down. "You might want

to consider trying a more polite approach."

"If I'd had the time, I would have," the round man said, glancing over them again. "Where's Karrde?"

"He's not here," Mara said. And not likely to bump into this meeting any time soon, either, she added silently to herself. He was over in the Gekto system making some shipping arrangements, and wasn't due to return until tomorrow. She could only hope he wouldn't be as easily nabbed as the rest of them had been. "I'm Mara Jade, currently in command of the *Wild Karrde*. What do you want?"

The man's eyes narrowed. Mara met his gaze evenly; and after a

**"Wait a minute,"
Mara cut him off.
"I've already told
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this sort of work."**

few seconds, his face cleared and he even smiled slightly.

"Mara Jade. I've heard a great deal about you, young lady. Yes, you'll do nicely."

Beside Mara, Dankin stirred as if he was about to speak. Mara shot him a quick glance, and he subsided.

"Very good, indeed," the large man murmured. "Perfectly in command, both of yourself and of your people. Yes, you'll do."

He took a deep breath. "First, some introductions. My name is Ja Bardrin. Perhaps you've heard of me."

Mara kept her face steady, wincing inwardly at the ripple of surprise that ran through the rest of the crew. Of course they'd heard of the industrialist—half the sector had—but that was no reason to play into this false-modesty, ego self-stroking game of his. "I think I've noticed your name go by once or twice in a footnote," she told him calmly. "Under weapons and ship systems, if I recall correctly. Usually dealing in market areas Uoti hasn't gotten to yet."

She had the small satisfaction of drawing a flash of annoyance from him on that one. The Bardrin Group and the Uoti Corporate had been jockeying for market position and prestige for over two decades now, a rivalry that was deep and bitter and showed no signs of being resolved any time soon.

Unfortunately, Bardrin's brief flicker of anger subsided too quickly for her to use the lowered mental guard to pull any insight from his mind. "But enough of this chitchat," she continued. "I'll ask again: what do you want?"

Bardrin locked eyes with her. "My daughter Sansia has been captured. I want you to rescue her."

Mara frowned. "I think your information sifters need a refresher course in how to do their job. We don't handle military operations."

"The mission requires a woman," Bardrin said. "A resourceful, competent, combat-trained human female."

"So go hire a Mistryl."

Bardrin shook his head. "There's no time to contact them, even if I knew how to go about it. I have to get Sansia back now, before her captors realize who it is they have."

"What are you talking about?" Odonnl spoke up. "You said they kidnapped her."

"I said they captured her," Bardrin countered, pinning Odonnl into his chair with a single contemptuous glance. "Kindly pay attention."

He brought his gaze back to Mara. "She and the SoroSuub 3000 luxury yacht she was flying were taken by a pirate gang while in port on Makksre and given to a slaver consortium headquartered on Torpris and run by a Drach'nam named Praysh." He lifted his eyebrows slightly. "I presume you've also come across *that* name in your footnote perusals."

"Once or twice," Mara conceded, suppressing a grimace. In the circles the *Wild Karrde* moved in, the name of Chay Praysh was even more well-known than Bardrin's. "I understand he makes the late and unlamented Jabba the Hutt look like a fine, upstanding citizen."

"Then you understand why I want Sansia and her ship out of his hands," Bardrin said, his voice suddenly low and with an underlying edge of desperation. "I know Karrde would have been willing to help me; but Karrde's not here. You, Jade, must make the decision."

"What about the authorities?" Dankin spoke up. "The Sector Patrol, or even the New Republic?"

"And have them do what?" Bardrin shot back. "Request an audience with Praysh? Mount an attack on his fortress that will leave it in ruins and everyone inside dead? Besides, their security leaks like rock sifters. If Praysh learns who Sansia is, he'll bleed me for everything I own. And then kill her anyway."

He looked at Mara, an almost pleading look in his eyes. "Sansia will have been sent to work in the slime pits in his fortress," he said. "He sends all human female captives there—some deep desire to humiliate them, I presume. You'll have to get them to take you in as another prisoner—"

"Wait a minute," Mara cut him off. "I've already told you we don't do this sort of work."

"Then you'd better learn how quickly," Bardrin rumbled, his earlier desperation changing abruptly into ominous threat. "There's no time for me to get anyone else. You're it."

Mara crossed her arms, bringing her hand close to the tiny blaster concealed inside her left sleeve. "And if I refuse?"

"There are twenty-four blasters concealed in the walls of this room," Bardrin said. "Three trained on each of you. Before you could even pull that weapon clear, you'd watch your crewmates die around you."

Mara flicked her eyes across the room, stretching out to the Force as she did so. He was right; she could sense the alert presences hidden behind the ornately carved walls all around them.

And if she hadn't been willing to risk Chin's life earlier, she certainly wasn't going to play games with the entire *Wild Karrde's* crew now. "You didn't answer my question," she said, unfolding her arms.

"You won't refuse," Bardrin declared, leaning back in his chair. "You see, you've just now given me all the leverage I need. You'll go to Torpris and bring back Sansia and her ship...or I'll execute your entire crew."

Someone off to her left inhaled sharply. "You can't be that stupid," Mara said, trying to put confidence she didn't feel into her tone. Through the Force she could read Bardrin's intentions, and knew he was deadly serious. "You kill Karrde's people, and Karrde *will* come after you. And I guarantee he's not an enemy to trifle with."

"Neither am I, my dear," Bardrin said darkly. "A contest between us might prove quite interesting."

He leveled a thick finger at her. "But regardless of the outcome, you would still have to live out your life with the knowledge that it was your obstinate stubbornness that had sent them to their deaths. I don't think that's a burden you really want to carry."

"There's no need to be quite so melodramatic," Mara said, forcing her frustration and anger deep down where it wouldn't show. To find herself being so easily manipulated was infuriating.

But she had no choice. She was Karrde's second-in-command, and she'd seen the concern and respect he consistently showed toward his people. She wasn't about to lower those high standards;

and she certainly wasn't going to risk her people's deaths by refusing Bardrin. And everyone in the room knew it. "I'll see what I can do. What can I have in the way of equipment?"

"Anything you want," Bardrin said, standing up and waving a hand. Behind them, Mara heard the doors open. "My people will escort your crewmates to their quarters, where they'll remain until you and Sansia return. You and I will go make whatever arrangements you need."

"Fine," Mara said, falling into step beside him as he passed between the entering lines of guards.

But that didn't mean the matter would end with Sansia's rescue, she promised herself silently. Not by a long shot.



Bardrin had told her that Praysh's mansion and grounds were set up near the center of one of Torpris's larger cities. He had failed to mention, however, that that particular section of the city was otherwise composed entirely of slums.

Or at least that was how it seemed to Mara as she maneuvered her landspeeder down the winding streets toward the high walls of the compound, wincing at the garbage and debris piled in alleyways between the dilapidated buildings and trying not to hit any of the ragged derelicts shuffling along the street. A dozen different species were represented here, all looking equally hopeless, and she found herself wondering how much of it was a result of Praysh's presence in the city.

Passing one final clump of huddled beings, she reached the side door she'd been told to come to. Flanking it were a pair of Drach'nam guards, looking even more massive than usual for the species in their heavy body armor. Each of them held a neuronc whip, with a holstered blaster and long knife standing ready in reserve. "Hey, there," she called cheerfully to them, eyeing the whips with the sort of contempt she reserved for unnecessarily barbaric weapons. "I have a package here for His First Greatness Chay Praysh, a gift from the Mrahash of Kvabja. May I enter?"

There was an almost chuckle, quickly strangled off, from one of the guards. "Really," he said, lumbering toward her. "Bring it here

and let's have a look."

Mara slid out of the vehicle and pulled the packing cylinder from the storage compartment in back. It was large—a good meter tall and half a meter in diameter—but fairly light, most of its bulk consisting of cushioning material for the delicate floater globe she'd borrowed from Bardrin. "It's some kind of expensive art object, I think," she said, setting it carefully down in front of him.

"Oh, it's that, all right," the guard agreed, looking Mara up and down. "Just a minute."

He went back to the door and busied himself with an intercom panel built into the wall. There was a breath of movement beside Mara—

[Leave it and go,] an alien voice spoke quietly from behind her.

Mara turned. A Togorian female was standing at the rear of the landspeeder, her fur matted and dirty, clearly just another of the derelicts loitering on the street. But her yellow eyes were bright and alive, and her teeth were bared slightly toward the guards. "Excuse me?" Mara asked.

[I said leave it and go,] the alien said, mouthing the Ghl trade language words with some difficulty. [You are in great danger here.]

"Oh, don't be silly," Mara said, shaking her head with casual unconcern even as she wondered at the Togorian's courage in sticking her neck out this way. Clearly, she knew or suspected what happened to human females who wandered near Praysh's fortress; but to try to chase a potential prize out from under the slaver's snout this way bordered on the suicidal. "I'm just delivering a present to His First Greatness, that's all."

The Togorian hissed. [Fool—you *are* the present,] she snarled. [Flee, while you still can.]

"Okay, we're set," the guard said, keying off the intercom and walking over to Mara. She turned back to him, making sure to keep a pleasantly blank expression on her face. If he even suspected the Togorian had tried to warn her, there might be unpleasant repercussions. "You can take it right in."

"Thank you," Mara said, stooping to pick up the cylinder—

A gauntleted hand came down with a thunk onto the top of the package. "After we unpack it, of course."

Mara felt her muscles tighten. "What do you mean?" she asked cautiously, straightening up.

The guard already had his knife out, a nasty-looking serrated weapon with a handguard consisting of a series of thick, needle-

sharp spikes alternatively curving up and down from the base of the blade. "I mean we unpack it out here," he said, digging the blade in beneath the lid. "Never can tell what someone might try to slip inside the packaging, you know."

Mara flicked a glance over his shoulder at the second guard, a sense of things gone suddenly and terribly wrong rippling through her. Nestled in its hiding place between the inner and outer shells of the cylinder, she would have bet heavily that her lightsaber could slip through any standard weapons scan Praysh's guards might have put the package through. But unpacking it outside the fortress was not a possibility she'd expected. "But what if you break it?" she asked anxiously.

"Don't worry—we do this all the time," the guard assured her. "H'sishi, I thought I told you scavengers you were supposed to stay behind the mark line."

[Your pardon,] the Togorian said, her tone almost groveling. [I saw the shiny metal—]

"And hoped you could get first grabs, huh?" The guard finished slicing off the top and peeled away the first plate of packing foam. "Here you go, scavengers," he called loudly, hurling the lid and the foam down the street.

Abruptly, the gathered loiterers exploded into action, diving toward the flying pieces as if they were prize jewels instead of unwanted garbage. The guard continued digging down, throwing more foam plates into the melee, until he reached the floater globe at the center. "There it is," he said, reaching in and carefully pulling out the globe. "Nice. Okay," he added, handing the globe to Mara. "Now you can go in."

Mara swallowed, glancing down at the cylinder as the guard continued to unload the packaging from the bottom and throw out the pieces. She looked up—

To find H'sishi's yellow eyes steady on her. Mara felt her lip twitch; and then, to her surprise, the alien bared her teeth slightly, as if she'd found a hint she'd been searching for. There was a movement from the side, and Mara looked back just as the guard hefted the cylinder itself over his head and hurled it toward the seething, quarreling crowd.

A dozen of the derelicts abandoned their fight for the foam scraps and charged toward the spot where it would land. But H'sishi was faster. With a single leap she got under the cylinder, snatching it into her arms and hissing a warning at the two or three

who tried to grab it away. Another hiss, and the crowd reluctantly fell back.

"I guess she really *did* want the shiny metal," the guard said with a sneer. "Okay, human, let's go."



Despite the fortress's sleek and modern exterior, the interior was dark and decidedly dank, its twisting and rough-floored corridors clearly modeled on the hiding-tunnels much prized by Drach'nam on their homeworld. Mara didn't bother to keep track of the route as her five-guard escort took her ever deeper into the fortress, concentrating instead on evaluating Praysh's overall defense structure and gradually increasing the level of nervousness she was displaying in her body language and infrequent attempts at conversation. Her lightsaber was going to be severely missed; but even if she'd been able to smuggle the weapon inside, she'd already concluded that the best hope of getting out would be in Sansia's impounded ship. Fighting their way back along the tunnels and out into the grounds was not an option she was interested in trying.

Still, that lightsaber had been Luke's once, and he was going to kill her if she lost it. Hopefully, when this was all over, she'd be able to track H'sishi down and buy it back from her.

They reached Praysh's audience chamber at last, a large, high-ceilinged room that by its gloom, smells, and general repulsiveness brought back unpleasant memories of Jabba the Hutt's throne room on Tatooine. His First Greatness obviously lacked Jabba's egalitarian sensibilities, though; the only beings in the room were more of Praysh's fellow Drach'nam.

"Well, well," Praysh called, swiveling his throne around to face the incoming group. "What have we here? A present from the Mrahash of Kvabja, is it?"

"Yes, Your First Greatness," Mara said, putting a nervous quaver into her tone as she glanced surreptitiously around. There was a pair of camouflaged blaster ports in the false wall behind Praysh's throne, but other than that the only defenses were the handful of guards standing between her and the slaver chief. Unlike the door



wardens, this group carried no blasters, but were armed only with the same type of long knives and neuronics whips. Probably the intent was to keep the more dangerous weapons away from rioting prisoners or slaves; still, it was an overconfidence she might well be able to exploit. "He sends you greetings and—"

"Take that bauble, someone," Praysh cut her off, waving a gem-encrusted scepter toward her. "You—human—step forward."

One of the guards took the floater globe and nudged her forward. Stretching out with all her senses, Mara walked toward the throne. Somewhere along here there would undoubtedly be a test to make sure she was nothing more than the useless slave she appeared...

She'd gone no more than three steps when it came. Abruptly, one of the guards ahead pulled his whip from his side and with a casual flick of his wrist sent the lash snaking toward her.

Mara gasped and threw her hands uselessly in front of her face, forcing back the reflex to dodge or duck or do something—anything—that would be more effective.

To her relief, the lash cracked a few centimeters short of her face. "Your First Greatness," she gasped, taking a quick and unsteady step backward. "Please, sir—what have I done?"

The only answer was the sound of another whip from behind her. She half turned—

And suddenly the lash curled itself around her knees and a wave of pain surged through her body.

Mara screamed, an explosive sound that was only partially role-playing, as she toppled onto the floor, the whip's current arcing agonizingly through her body. She clawed once at the lash, screaming again as the current burned at her fingertips. "Please—no—please—"

"Here—defend yourself," a voice called out; and she looked up as a small blaster landed on the floor beside her legs.

She grabbed at the weapon, forcing her fingers to fumble as if dealing with a totally unfamiliar object, clenching her teeth against the waves of pain as every part of her being screamed at her to *do* something. The blaster was undoubtedly useless, just another part of Praysh's sadistic test; but if she swiveled on one hip, swinging her legs hard around, she might at least be able to yank the whip out of her attacker's hand.

But if she did that—if she showed any sign of combat skill whatsoever—she would probably die.

And then so would the *Wild Karrde's* crew.

She got a grip on the blaster at last, bending awkwardly around to try to bring the weapon to bear on her assailant. The muzzle wavered uncontrollably, and she tried to prop her elbow on the floor to steady it, sobbing now like a child. The blaster sagged and dropped from her paralyzed fingers—

And abruptly, thankfully, the current shut off.

Mara lay there, unmoving, still sobbing through clenched teeth as she worked out the sudden cramps in her leg muscles. If she'd misjudged Praysh's intentions—if he'd decided to kill her for sport instead of putting her down in the slime pits...

"That was an object lesson," Praysh said conversationally. There was a movement beside her, and rough fingers began unwrapping the lash from around her legs. "Now that you've seen what a neuronc whip feels like, I'm sure you won't ever want to provoke its use again."

"No—please—no," Mara managed, the words coming out mangled through her gasping sobs. A pair of hands grabbed her upper arms and hauled her up onto her feet. She took a second to confirm that her legs were recovered enough to hold her weight, then let her knees wobble and collapse again beneath her. The two Drach'nam pulled her up again and turned her to face Praysh. "Please—" she whispered.

"You belong to me now," Praysh said quietly, his colorless eyes staring at her. "Your safety—your well-being—your life—are all in my hand. If you serve well, you will survive. If not, there will be neuronc whips around you for the remainder of a short and excruciatingly painful life. Do I make myself clear?"

Mara nodded quickly, dropping her gaze and hunching her shoulders, the helpless terror of a beaten animal. "Good," Praysh said, waving off-handedly toward a different door leading out of the chamber. The show was over, and already he was bored with the performer. "Take her to the slavekeeper," he ordered. "Enjoy your new life here, human."

Halfway down a long flight of stairs her escorting guards apparently decided they'd had enough of carrying her and cut her loose to walk on her own. Aside from a lingering tingle in her muscles Mara had completely recovered, but she was careful to maintain a weak-kneed stagger for their benefit the rest of the way down. Neuronc whips were the ultimate glorification of savagery and degradation, just the sort of thing Praysh's thugs would use as their primary persuader, and she had no intention of letting them know

how fast she could recover from their effects.

The slime pits were in the lowest level of the fortress, composed of a series of interconnected trenches about two meters wide and a hundred meters long set into the floor. On the walkways between them strolled the Drach'nam guards, idly fingering their whips or playing with the hilts of their knives. Perhaps two hundred women, most of them young looking, slogged slowly through the waist-deep gray muck in the pits, bent over double with their arms dug into the slime, their faces bare centimeters above the surface. All those Mara could see wore identical expressions of blank hopelessness that sent a shiver through her.

"I'll explain it just once," the slavekeeper said, gesturing almost genially toward the pits. "The nutrient slime in there is home to the pupal form of the krizar creatures His First Greatness uses to patrol the grounds. The pupae are hard-shelled and ellipsoid, about the size of one of your pathetic little thumbs. Your job is to find the ones that are starting to break out of their shells and put them up on the walkway where they'll be retrieved and moved to the main hatchery."



"How do I know when they're ready—?"

"You'll know when they're ready when they start to wiggle and chew their way out," the slavekeeper cut her off sharply. A couple of heads turned at the sudden harsh tone; most of the women didn't even bother to look up. "And don't try just pulling out everyone you find. If the pupae are out too long before they're ready, they'll die."

He waved his whip in front of her nose. "And dead pupae make us *very* unhappy. Understood?"

Mara swallowed, forcing herself to shrink back from him. "Yes, sir," she murmured.

"Good," the slavekeeper said, his tone back to genial again, a being who clearly enjoyed his work. "Your head fur is an interesting shade of color. It will be of no use to you in the pits; perhaps you would like to sell it to me."

"In exchange for what?" Mara asked cautiously.

"Favors. More food, perhaps, or other kindnesses."

Mara fought back a grimace. The thought of her hair hanging from a slavekeeper's trophy wall was utterly abhorrent. But on the other hand, he could probably take it without any payment at all if he chose. Hopefully, she wouldn't be here long enough for him to get around to that. "Can I think about it?" she asked timidly.

He shrugged. Clearly, this was just a game to help him pass the time. "If you wish. Oh, one more thing. If you *don't* get the pupae out fast enough, they'll start digging through the shells on their own. No problem with that; except that their mouth palps are always the first things that come out. If they get those into your skin, you'll need a trip to the med facility to get it taken off."

"Oh," Mara said in a small voice. Now, *that* was very useful information. "Does it hurt?"

He gave her one of those evil smiles that Drach'nam did so well. "No more than the whip. Now get in there."

Mara looked down at her jumpsuit. "But—"

She didn't even get a chance to finish her protest. Putting a massive arm around the back of her waist, the slavekeeper swept her off the walkway into the nearest of the trenches.

She managed to hang onto her balance as she landed, keeping her head and most of her torso up out of the slime. But the impact sent a wave of thick muck splashing outward at the nearest workers. "Sorry," she apologized.

One of the women looked up at her, a dab of the slime oozing slowly down her cheek. "Don't worry about it," she said in a voice

that sounded more dead than alive. "Don't worry about getting dirty, either. You'll never be clean again."

A neuron whip cracked warningly overhead. Mara shied back, but the other woman didn't seem to notice or care as she dug into the slime again. Stomach twisting with revulsion, Mara eased her arms into the muck and got to work.



It took her three hours of nauseating, back-breaking sifting before her search pattern finally paid off. "Your name Sansia?" she asked quietly as she came up beside the woman whose holo Bardrin had showed her earlier.

The other woman looked up at her, eyes narrowing suspiciously. "Yes," she acknowledged warily. "What about it?"

Mara glanced casually around. None of the Drach'nam were in earshot at the moment. "A close relative of yours asked me to get you out of here."

She'd expected elation, or barely-contained joy, or at least a

"It's got me!" she yelped, flailing around and sending bits of slime flying through the air all around her. "Get it off—get it off!"

certain amount of surprise. But Sansia's reaction wasn't any of those. "Did he really," she said, her voice dark and scornful. "How very kind of him."

Mara frowned. "You don't seem very pleased."

"Oh, I'm overjoyed," Sansia said sarcastically. "The joy is merely tem-

pered by a somewhat cynical disbelief. You're what, some kind of mercenary?"

"Not exactly," Mara said. "Disbelief in what?"

"In Daddy dear's motivations," Sansia said, digging down into the slime. "Let me guess. He told you about my terrible plight, and how important I am to him and the business, and that he would do

anything and give anything to get me back. Once you were properly teary-eyed, he turned up the heat and either talked, maneuvered, or bribed you into charging here to my rescue. Right so far?"

"Close enough," Mara said cautiously.

Sansia's hand came out of the slime holding one of the krizar pupae. She glanced at both the long ends, then tossed it back in behind her. "But though he desperately wanted his darling daughter back, he also made it clear—subtly, of course—that he wanted the ship back even more. In fact, he probably gave you all the access and command codes you'd need to get it flying whether I was with you or not. Am I still right?"

Mara felt her throat tighten. "He said I needed to be able to fly the ship if you were incapacitated during the escape."

Sansia snorted. "That sounds like him. Plausible straight to the top, but phony as Imperial confidence. The fact is, merc, that he doesn't care about me one single bit. If he did, he wouldn't have sent me to Makksre on that half-daft run in the first place. He wants the *Winning Gamble* back, pure and simple."

Mara glanced around again. One of the guards across the way was eyeing her, and she dug her arms again into the slime. "What's so special about the ship?"

"Oh, it's just about three levels past state-of-the-art, that's all," Sansia said bitterly. "It's got an incredible flight system, an unbelievable weapons targeting array, and a crazy, one-of-a-kind defensive shoot-back system I think Daddy must have stolen from somewhere."

Mara studied her face, stretching out with the Force to try to get a feel for her mind. The same bitterness she could hear in Sansia's voice was indeed roiling through her emotions. "So what are you saying?" she asked. "That you don't want me to try to get you out of here?"

Sansia's eyes slunk away from Mara's gaze. "I'm just telling you how it is," she muttered. "Maybe warning you that somewhere along the line he's probably going to try to force your hand. Try to get you to run without me. I guess I thought you should be ready for that."

And was hoping against hope that, unlike her father, her rescuer had a conscience? "Thanks for the warning," Mara said. Her fingers touched something hard in the slime: one of the elusive krizar pupae. "It just means we'll need to move up the timetable a little," she added, pulling the pupa to just above the surface where she

could examine it. The entire shell was solid; clearly, this one wouldn't be poking its jaws out any time soon. Perfect. "Where will they take us after we're finished here?"

"Across the hall to a really disgusting barracks-style sleeping room," Sansia said. For the first time since their conversation began Mara could sense the faint whisperings of cautious hope in the other woman's voice and emotions. "They'll let us wash up, then feed us."

"Showers or tubs?"

"More like animal watering troughs than real tubs," Sansia said contemptuously. "Once they bring you down here, you're never clean again."

"Yes, I've heard that," Mara said. "All the more reason not to hang around any longer than we have to. Are there surveillance cams in the room?"

"There are a couple of obvious ones near the door. Probably a whole bunch of non-obvious ones hidden around, too."

"Okay," Mara said. "One more question: how long to the shift change?"

Sansia peered across the room at a set of glowing emblems embedded in the wall. "Not long. Maybe ten minutes."

"Good," Mara said. "I have a couple of things to pick up first, so I'll catch up with you in the sleeping room. Get washed up fast, and be ready to move as soon as I get back."

Sansia was eyeing her suspiciously, but she nodded. "I'll be ready," she said. "Good luck."

Mara nodded and moved on, holding the krizar shell she'd found beneath the surface as she slogged along, wanting to put a little distance between her and Sansia before she made her move. Out of the corner of her eye she saw one of the Drach'nam walking purposefully down the walkway toward her, flicking his whip into the air as he came, no doubt preparing a comment and object lesson about idle chat while on duty. Mara let him get almost within whip range...

And with the most spine-curling scream she could muster, she swung her left arm up, clutching the forearm with her right hand. "It's got me!" she yelped, flailing around and sending bits of slime flying through the air all around her. "Get it off—get it off!"

The Drach'nam reached the edge of her trench in a single bound. "Get your hand out of the way," he snapped, leaning precariously over her as he caught her left wrist and hauled her bodily up out of

the pit. The movement brought her up against his belted knife, and she winced as the needle-sharp spikes of the handguard dug briefly into her ribs. "I said move it," he repeated, dropping her onto her feet on the walkway and prying her right hand away from its grip.

To reveal the krizar shell hanging from the underside of her left arm.

Or at least, that was what Mara hoped it looked like. Her Force-manipulating skills might not be as good as Luke Skywalker's, but it was no big trick to use the Force to hold the shell pressed firmly against her arm as if the creature inside were hanging on. The only danger was that the guard might brush off the glob of slime strategically placed at the intersection point and notice that there were no krizar palps linking the shell to the arm.

But after all the times this had undoubtedly happened, the guard was clearly uninterested in the details. "Got one there, all right," he growled, shifting his grip to her right hand and pulling her along the walkway toward the door. "Hey! Your Seventh Greatness?"

"Yeah, go ahead," the slavekeeper told him, gesturing the guards flanking the door to open it. "Tell Blath to be careful this time—His First Greatness isn't going to like it if he loses another one."

The door opened. A second Drach'nam stepped to Mara's left side as they headed out, taking her left arm and holding it in an iron grip at the level of her waist—probably, Mara decided, making sure she didn't knock the krizar off against her side. The door slammed shut, and the three of them headed at a fast walk down the corridor.

Mara didn't know where the med facility was, but odds were it wasn't very far away, which meant she had to move fast. She continued to moan and cry like a helpless and broken slave as the Drach'nam half dragged her along, struggling ineffectually in her supposed pain against the casually unbreakable grips of her two escorts. Under cover of her attempted flailings, she glanced down to her left. The second guard's knife was bouncing along only a few centimeters from where he was holding her left arm pinioned.

And here was going to be the riskiest part of her plan. With both of her arms under their control, the two Drach'nam shouldn't be expecting any trouble from her and should therefore be less watchful than they might otherwise be. But if that assumption proved false, there was going to be some serious and immediate trouble.

But there was nothing for it but to try. Stretching out to the Force, she slid the knife partially out of its sheath, monitoring the alien's

mind closely to see if he would notice the sudden change in weight at his belt. Carefully, trying not to jar the weapon, she eased the spiked handguard up against her left forearm near the spot where she was still holding the krizar pupa in place. Two quick jabs—two stabs of genuine pain against the backdrop of her agony act—and she eased the knife down into its sheath again.

Just in time. The knife was barely back in place when the guard on her right brought her to a halt at a side door, shoving the panel open with his free hand. Shifting her attention to the krizar pupa riding her arm, Mara sent it spinning away down the dingy corridor ahead of them.

After the darkness everywhere else inside the fortress, the medical facility was something of a surprise: bright, clean, and reasonably well-equipped, with a tiled floor and even some sections of wood paneling. And the reason for the altered tone was immediately apparent: the medic wasn't a Drach'nam.

"Sit down," a tired-looking Bith in a slightly shabby medic's tunic said, coming around a desk and gesturing them to the room's lone



treatment table. His tone was brisk, but his face and hands betrayed the edge of nervousness that Mara suspected was probably a common condition among non-Drach'nam in Praysh's employ. "Where is the pupa?"

The guard on Mara's left lifted her arm. "It's right—oh, *pustina*. It's gone!"

"It must have fallen off," the Bith said, the tension in his voice suddenly jumping sharply. His eyes flicked guiltily toward the wall to the left— "You two had better go see if you can find it."

The two guards didn't argue, but charged immediately back out into the corridor. "Did you notice it fall off?" the Bith asked, turning Mara's arm over and starting to clean the residual slime away.

"No, I didn't," Mara said, putting some whining fear into her voice as she looked past the medic's large head. Through an open doorway in the back of the treatment room she could see a large supply cabinet. Stretching out to the Force, she eased the transparisteel cabinet doors open a few millimeters. The labels on the vials were too far away to read; but if the colors and bottle shapes followed conventional New Republic pharmaceutical standards, the three she was looking for were there. Lifting one of the vials off its shelf, she slid it quickly down along the wall to the floor.

There was no way to know where the surveillance cam back there was located, but there was nothing she could do about it from out here anyway. She could only hope the

**"I'm used to being underestimated,"
Mara assured her.**

bottle's sudden movement wouldn't be noticed by whoever His First Greatness had monitoring the spy displays. Getting a grip on the second bottle, she lowered it to the floor beside the first...

"Odd," the Bith said. He had that section of her arm clean now and was peering at the two puncture marks she'd made with the guard's knife. "These don't look like krizar palpal indentations at all. Are you certain that was what grabbed you?"

"I don't know," Mara moaned, moving the last of the three vials to the floor and then snagging a couple of small squeeze bottles and adding them to her collection. "All I know is that it hurt. It hurt a lot."

She could sense the sympathy and frustration in the Bith. "Yes, I know," he murmured. "It is not an easy life for you down here."

"No," she said, half sobbing as she moved her prizes across the

floor to the examination room doorway. Whoever was on surveillance duty might reasonably be expected to ignore an empty supply room; but a room occupied by a human slave and Bith medic was another matter entirely. She had to take out the surveillance cam in here before she could bring the bottles the rest of the way to her.

"Ow!" she gasped suddenly, half pulling her left arm out of the Bith's grip as she quickly studied the wall he'd glanced at earlier. The cam, clearly designed to be hidden, was fairly obvious to someone of Mara's training and experience: a small lens masquerading as a knot hole in the wooden paneling.

"I am sorry," the Bith said, and she caught his mixture of concern and puzzlement as he immediately eased his grip on her arm. "There should not be anything where I was touching that should hurt."

"Well, it did," Mara said petulantly. With the fingers of her right hand, she surreptitiously dug a wad of slime from the hardening mass caking her legs. "They were whipping me earlier up in that big open place—ow!" She snatched her left arm away from him again, flailing this time with her right as well. The motion sent a half dozen small globs of slime spinning across the room—

And with a little help from her Force abilities, the largest of the globs splattered into the wall squarely over the hidden surveillance cam.

"Again, I am sorry," the Bith said, glancing over at the wall. He took a second look, his whole body stiffening suddenly as he realized what had happened. "Excuse me," he said, grabbing up a towel and hurrying over to the wall.

And with the cam still covered, and the medic's attention elsewhere, Mara brought her vials and squeeze bottles flying across from the doorway and dropped them smoothly down the front of her jumpsuit. By the time the Bith finished his cleanup job, they were safely nestled in the folds of material at her waist.

"My apologies," he said as he put the towel in the disposal and returned to her. "The nutrient can damage the wall material, you see, which His First Greatness was kind enough to allow me."

And he would be in serious trouble if he allowed the cam to stay covered too long? Probably. "It's okay," Mara muttered.

Once again, she was just in time. The Bith had just taken her arm again when the two Drach'nam guards clumped back into the room. "Nothing," one of them snarled, glaring suspiciously at Mara. "What

did you do with it? Well?"

Mara shrank away from him. "Nothing," she said, her voice frightened and pleading. "Please—I didn't do anything."

"Then where is it?" the Drach'nam demanded, taking a threatening step toward her, neuronc whip in hand.

"Perhaps it was a krizar which was still immature," the Bith spoke up, holding a hand up protectively between Mara and the guard. "Its grip was weak and not completely firm."

"Then where is it now?" the second guard put in. "It was attached to her—I saw it."

"If it's not in the corridor, it must still be in the growth room," the Bith said reasonably. "Perhaps it fell off again into the nutrient pits."

The guards continued to glare, and Mara held her breath. If either of them had actually looked at the pupa after they left the room...

But apparently neither of them had. "Yeah," the guard said with ill grace. "Maybe."

The Bith glanced at a wall chrono. "At any rate, the work shift is over," he said. "Why not escort her back to the communal, and then you can search the walkways in the growth room."

"Don't tell us our job, Bith," the other guard growled, baring his teeth as he grabbed Mara's arm in a none-too-gentle grip. "Come on, human. Time for your slops."



The mass sleeping/eating/cleanup room Sansia had spoken about was directly across the corridor from the slime pits. It was also fully as disgusting as her tone had led Mara to expect. About half of the woman had finished their cleaning by the time Mara arrived, leaving the liquid in the long troughs looking more like a runnier version of the slime than anything resembling water. Mara joined the crowd of women waiting their turn; and under cover of the bodies pressing around her, she worked the vials out of her jumpsuit and confirmed that they did indeed contain the chemicals she wanted. Once again, the comprehensive saboteur training the Emperor had given her so long ago was going to come in handy.

"I thought you were kidding about going to pick up some things," Sansia's voice came softly from behind her shoulder, too low for any of the other women around them to hear. "Where did you get those?"

"Medic supply cabinet," Mara told her, concentrating on the task of pouring the first vial into one of the squeeze bottles, keeping them both at waist height where the activity would be shielded from prying eyes.

Sansia made a sound in the back of her throat. "I suppose it's too late to mention this, but the med facility probably has surveillance cams, too."

"I know," Mara said. "Don't worry, I took care of it. Here, hold these."

She passed over the empty vial and full squeeze bottle, giving Sansia a quick once-over as she did. Despite the other woman's efforts to clean up, her hair and clothing were still badly streaked and stained with the slime she'd spent the day in. Whatever Praysh's reasons for hating human females, Mara decided darkly, he'd honed his campaign of degradation to a fine edge.

"I didn't think you were going to come back," Sansia said, her voice sounding a little odd as Mara began filling the second squeeze bottle from one of her other vials. "I'm glad I was wrong."

"I'm used to being underestimated," Mara assured her. "You think you can find your way to where your ship's being kept?"

"As I would the road back home from an execution ground," Sansia said feelingly.

"Good. Describe the route for me."

Even without looking she could sense the sudden tension in Sansia's mind and body. "Why do you need to know?" the other woman asked cautiously. "We're going to be together, right?"

"We could get separated," Mara pointed out patiently. "Or you could be hurt or otherwise incapacitated. I don't want to have to lug you around and look for the way out at the same time."

There was a short pause. "I suppose that makes sense," Sansia conceded reluctantly at last. "Okay. You head out the door over there and turn right..."

She went through the whole route, describing each turn and intersection in precise terms. Clearly, the woman had an eye for detail. By the time she finished, the second squeeze bottle was full.

And they were ready. "Okay," Mara said, handing Sansia the second empty vial and taking the full squeeze bottle back from her.

"Ditch those empties somewhere out of sight and then move over toward the door. You ever have fire drills in here?"

Sansia blinked. "Not since I arrived, no."

"Well, you're going to have one now," Mara said. "When the Drach'nam come barging in, make sure you don't get run over. Other than that, just wait near the door until I come for you."

"Understood." Sansia took a deep breath. "Good luck."

She moved away from Mara, easing gingerly through the press of still slime-covered women. Mara stayed with the crowd, moving slowly forward as places at the trough opened up, running through a slow mental countdown and wondering if she could risk cleaning up a bit herself before they made their break. Probably shouldn't take the time, she reluctantly decided. The Bith would notice the missing vials the first time he looked into the supply cabinet, and he'd probably be as quick to report the loss as he'd been to scrape the slime off the surveillance cam.

The last woman in front of her moved away, and Mara was finally in position. Palming her last full vial, she stepped to the trough; and, with a smooth wave of her arm, she poured its contents into the filthy water.

And with an angry hiss, the trough abruptly erupted with a sizzle of flame and a cloud of yellow smoke.

There were a half dozen piercing screams as women whose minds had been systematically reduced to near-catatonia woke up enough to claw their way back from this sudden and inexplicable danger. The smoke continued to billow up and out, and within seconds the room was impossible to see across. There were more screams and shouts, the thudding of feet and colliding bodies, as a sudden panic gripped women who had nearly lost the ability to feel emotion of any sort. There was no place to go, no place to hide, and they all knew it.

Praysh's guards were faster on the uptake than Mara had expected them to be. She was barely halfway to the door, pushing her way through the chaos, when the heavy panel slammed in and a dozen of the Drach'nam thundered into the room. Mara caught a glimpse of heavy extinguisher canisters as they passed her on their way to the smoking trough—

And then she'd made it to the door, and Sansia was at her side. "What did you *do*?" the other woman hissed.

"Just a little chemical diversion," Mara said, peering through the smoke at the doorway. Not all the guards had charged to the rescue

of Praysh's precious slave laborers: two of them were blocking the corridor just outside the room, neuronc whips held ready for any attempt by the slaves to take advantage of the confusion. "Stay behind me," she added, getting one of her squeeze bottles in each hand and stepping out the door.

One of the guards snorted at this slim human female apparently challenging them. "Where do you think *you're*—?"

He never got to finish his question. Raising her hands, Mara squeezed a shot of liquid from one of her bottles into each of the guards' faces. They sputtered, lunging forward even as they tried to turn away from the stream of spattering fluids. Crossing her wrists, Mara switched aim and gave each guard's face a dose from the other bottle—

And with howls that shook the corridor, both Drach'nam dropped their whips and staggered back away from the women, hands clutching at their faces.

"Come on," Mara snapped to Sansia. Ducking between the Drach'nam, she snatched up one of the fallen whips and headed at a dead run down the corridor.

She reached a cross corridor just as another pair of Drach'nam came around it. Gaping, they grabbed for their whips; but before they could get them into position, Mara's lash snaked out, wrapping around both of their necks. They bellowed almost as loudly as the last pair had as they fell into a tangle of arms and legs onto the stone floor. Mara plucked a replacement whip from one of their hands, and continued past.

"This way," Sansia called, in the lead now. "At the next corridor we turn right up the stairs—"

"Stop them!" a voice bellowed from behind them. Mara glanced back over her shoulder, her senses tingling with sudden danger—

And ahead of her, Sansia screamed.

Mara twisted back around, her whip already in motion. Two Drach'nam had appeared from ambush out of doors on opposite sides of the corridor, both their whips now wrapped around a violently twitching Sansia.

Mara snapped her whip at the attacker on the left, catching him a glancing blow across shoulder and back as he ducked away. He snarled something vicious as the current shot briefly through him, but managed to keep his grip on his own whip. Mara brought the lash back over her shoulder and sent it toward the other Drach'nam—

And then, without warning, the weapon abruptly seemed to catch in midair, the sudden loss of momentum nearly yanking it out of her hand. A movement above her caught her eye, and she looked up.

To see that the rocky ceiling overhead had vanished, replaced by a forest of thick, multi-barbed spines pointing down toward her. Her lash had hung up on them, hopelessly entangled among the barbs.

"Foolish human," Praysh's voice purred from some hidden speaker amid the thicket. "You didn't really think I would rely solely on neuronics whips and Drach'nam muscle to keep my slaves in line, did you?"

Mara ignored him, heading toward the two guards still pinioning Sansia in place between them. With their whips locked around her, they had only their knives left in reserve...

"Stop," Praysh ordered, all the levity gone from his voice. "I don't particularly want to kill you, human, but I will if you force my hand."

Mara kept going. Both guards had their knives out now, and had half turned to point them at the suicidal human charging toward her death. Mara stretched out toward the blades with the Force, preparing to twist them aside at just the right moment—

And then, behind her two opponents, the corridor was suddenly filling with Drach'nam.

Mara came to a reluctant stop, the sour taste of defeat in her mouth. Force skills or not, Imperial combat training or not, there was no way she could take on the entire garrison by herself. Not here, not now. "I'm willing to make a deal," she called toward the ceiling.

"I'm sure you are," Praysh said, purring again. "Guards: release the second woman and bring them both to my audience chamber. I have some questions I want to ask our scrappy little fighter."

With Sansia still suffering from the partial muscular paralysis of the neuronics whip, their progress up the stairway and along the stony corridors was decidedly slow. Mara supported the other

"We'll start the persuasion with your friend here. I don't think you want to hear the details."

woman as they walked, the guards glowering around them the whole way. Several times Mara asked for their help in carrying the injured woman, requests that went ignored.

Which was, of course, precisely the response—or lack of it—that she'd hoped for. With the task of supporting Sansia falling totally on her, she was able to adjust the timing and stall off their arrival at Praysh's audience chamber until Sansia was mostly recovered from her ordeal. Any fresh escape attempt they were able to make, after all, would be considerably simplified if they were each able to do their own running.

It was quickly clear, though, that Praysh had no intention of making any such attempts easy for them. From the number of Drach'nam lined up against the walls or standing in a protective ring around Praysh's throne, it looked like His First Greatness had half his garrison in here. "Looks like you're having a party," Mara commented as she and Sansia were led to within a couple of meters of the inner guard ring. "Are you that afraid of us?"

"Oh, the guards are merely here in hopes you'll give them an excuse to avenge what you did to Brok and Czic outside the slave quarters," Praysh said offhandedly. "I'm curious: where did you obtain the acid you sprayed into their faces?"

"I borrowed the ingredients from your dispensary," Mara told him. There was no point in deflecting the question; if they hadn't noticed the thefts yet, they would soon enough. "It's just a matter of knowing which chemicals to mix."

"Interesting," Praysh said, leaning back in his throne and regarding Mara with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion. "Hardly the sort of thing a slave sent by the Mrahash of Kvabja should be expected to have."

He shrugged elaborately. "But of course, that's an irrelevant comment, isn't it? Given that you weren't sent by the Mrahash of Kvabja."

Mara felt her throat tighten. Bardrin had assured her that the Mrahash was currently out of the sector, and that there was no way Praysh could check out her cover story. "Of course he sent me," she said, stretching out to the alien's mind, trying to figure out if this was some kind of trick.

"Spare me your lies," Praysh said, his voice suddenly harsh. And no, there was no trickery in his thoughts. "I have a communication from the Mrahash himself, saying he's never heard of you. In fact, I was just about to send for you when you made your pitiful escape effort."

"I told you Daddy would try to force you to leave without me," Sansia murmured.

A whip cracked from the side, and Sansia jerked, inhaling sharply in pain. Mara glanced at her, saw the bright streak of blood across her cheek. "If you have something to say, you will say it to me," Praysh said coldly. "And you will start by telling me who you are and exactly why you're here."

"And if I don't?" Mara asked.

Praysh's gaze shifted to Sansia. "We'll start the persuasion with your friend here. I don't think you want to hear the details."

Mara looked around the room, searching for a chink—any chink—in Praysh's defenses. But there wasn't one. About all she could do now is refuse to talk and hope there would be fewer guards to deal with in whatever torture chamber they took her and Sansia to.

Unless they didn't plan to let her watch. Or, worse, let her watch on a monitor from a different location entirely. That would mean letting them put Sansia under a knife...

A quarter of the way across the room, one of the guards at the chamber's main entrance door abruptly stepped forward, a comlink in his hand. "Your First Greatness, a word if I may," he called toward the throne. "I've just received word that there is new evidence of who this spy is."

"Excellent," Praysh said, swiveling his throne around to face that direction. "Bring it to me."

The guard spoke into the comlink, and the door opened to reveal two more Drach'nam and H'sishi, the Togorian scavenger Mara had met briefly outside the palace wall. Clutched in H'sishi's hands was a section of the packing cylinder Bardrin's floater globe had been in.

The section that had had Mara's lightsaber concealed in it.

Mara clenched her hands tightly as the trio marched through the assembled guards toward the throne. Any chance she and Sansia might have of escaping was going to depend heavily on the fact that Praysh didn't know about her Force abilities. If H'sishi showed the lightsaber to him, that advantage would vanish in that same heartbeat. She had to make her move before that happened.

But there was still no chance. A Drach'nam on either side of her, more of them crowding the room, the packing cylinder section too far away for her to rip out the inner lining and get the lightsaber out...

"Who is this?" Praysh demanded.

"A scavenger from the street," one of the guards said. "This is a section of the packing cylinder which the human brought your gift

in." He reached over to take the cylinder section from H'sishi—

The Togorian pulled it away from him. [It is mine to show,] she hissed. [My discovery. My reward.]

"Just let her bring it," Praysh said, gesturing impatiently. "Show me this supposed evidence."

Deliberately, Mara thought, H'sishi looked over at the two women. Then, stepping through the inner ring of guards, she held the cylinder section up in front of Praysh. [You see here,] she said, pointing a claw to the bottom. [It is the marking seal of the Uoti Corporate.]

"What?" Sansia muttered as Praysh leaned close to look, and Mara could sense her sudden confusion and suspicion. If her would-be rescuer was actually from their Uoti competitors instead of from her father—

"Quiet," Mara muttered back, frowning in some confusion of her own. There hadn't been any marking seals on the cylinder—she'd made sure of that. Had the Togorian mixed her cylinder up with some other piece of garbage?

"That is indeed the Uoti symbol," Praysh agreed, taking the section from H'sishi and turning his gaze on Mara again. "So that's what this is all about, is it? Uoti wants their new toys back."

Mara didn't reply, her eyes on H'sishi as she tried to figure out what was going on. But the Togorian's expression was totally unreadable.

"Yes, that must be it," Praysh decided. "And I suppose I should have expected this. I must congratulate you on your speed and efficiency in locating me—it's been, what, only a week since that particular acquisition?"

"Yet perhaps the efficiency is only an illusion, Your First Greatness," one of the Drach'nam spoke up, eyeing H'sishi suspiciously. "Recall that all the packing from the Uoti acquisition was similarly thrown to the scavengers. This alien could have obtained one of the marking seals and transferred it to this cylinder."

"No," Praysh told him. "The seal has the proper edge engraving carved into the metal around it. It's genuine."

He gave Mara a smile that sent an involuntary shiver down her back. "Besides, why else would a warrior of such skill deliberately step beneath my hand as she has?"

Mara looked back at H'sishi. The Togorian was gazing back at her now; and as their eyes met, she lifted a hand to casually rub at her neck, stretching her claws a little further from the ends of her fingers as she did so. Was she trying to show Mara how she'd faked

the edge engraving? Or was there some other message there?

And suddenly, Mara got it.

"I don't know what kind of trick this is supposed to be, Your First Greatness," she called, putting an edge of scorn into her voice. "But it's a pretty feeble one. I can tell from here that's not part of the cylinder I brought."

Praysh face darkened. "Can you really," he rumbled. "What remarkably good eyes. Or what a remarkable wretched memory. Perhaps that memory needs some encouragement."

[Perhaps a closer look at it would help, Your First Greatness,] H'sishi suggested.

"I think not," Praysh bit out. "The preliminary games are over. She's refused to play." He glared at Mara. "Your last chance, warrior, to do this the easy way."

H'sishi glanced at Mara, her expression suddenly looking stricken. Mara lifted her eyebrows, nodding fractionally toward the cylinder... [May I have the cylinder section back, Your First Greatness?] the Togorian asked.

"When I'm done with it," Praysh said shortly, his attention still on Mara. "No? Very well, then. Guards—"

And abruptly, H'sishi leaped up to the throne in front of him. Slashing her claws across the faces of the two bodyguards flanking Praysh, she snatched the cylinder section from his hands, slammed it across his head hard enough to stun, and reached her hand in to the inner lining. Above the roar of multiple Drach'nam bellows came the screech of tearing metal; and just as the inner ring of guards reached H'sishi and threw themselves on top of her, she flicked her wrist over their heads—

And Mara's lightsaber came spinning across the room toward her.

There was a warning shout from someone; but it was already far too late. Mara grabbed the weapon in an iron Force grip, yanking it through the Drach'nam hands trying to slap it out of the air. "Down!" she barked to Sansia as she caught and ignited the weapon, in the same motion cutting down the two guards flanking her.

And the entire audience chamber collapsed into pandemonium.

The nearest of the Drach'nam, too close to use their whips against her, went for their knives instead. They died holding them. Those further back lived a little longer, but not much. With no time to organize, too densely packed together for efficient use of their whips, and facing a weapon that could cut through the lashes with

ease, they had no chance at all. Mara slashed through their ranks like a mowing machine, littering the rocky ground behind her with their bodies, a haze of righteous fury clouding her vision. Retribution for Sansia and the other degraded women in the slave pits; retribution for piracy and robbery and cold-hearted murder; retribution for the danger they'd put the *Wild Karrde's* crew in—

And suddenly, or so it seemed, it was over.

She stood in the middle of the room, lightsaber held high, gasping hard with her exertion. All around her were piles of Drach'nam bodies—

[I would not have believed it.]

Mara spun around. H'sishi was pressed against the wall behind the throne, staring at Mara with an expression of stunned disbelief, a half dozen oozing wounds scattered across the matted fur of her face and torso. "How badly are you hurt?" Mara called, crossing the room toward her. None of the injuries looked serious, but she wasn't familiar enough with Togorian physiology to know for sure.

[Not badly,] H'sishi assured her. [They lost interest in me very quickly.]

"Lucky for me they did," Mara said grimly, focusing on the false wall behind H'sishi, the wall containing the two hidden blaster ports she'd spotted on her first trip through the chamber.

Only now there was a second hole, knife-blade-sized, just beneath each of the ports. And gripped in H'sishi's hand was an appropriated Drach'nam knife, its blade stained with the pale pink of Drach'nam blood.

"Thank you," Mara said, gesturing to the wall. "I wondered why they never fired at me."

[They never had time,] H'sishi said simply.

"I see that. Thank you. What about Praysh?"

[I believe he escaped,] H'sishi said. [Along with many of his guards. But we must hurry—your companion is already gone.]

"What?" Mara demanded, looking around again. Sansia was gone, all right. "Did Praysh take her?"

[No, she left alone, by that door.] H'sishi pointed.

Heading for her ship, no doubt, all set to take off and leave Mara and H'sishi stranded here. "Blast it," Mara snarled. "Come on."

The corridors, not surprisingly, were deserted. Mara led the way, lightsaber in hand, silently berating herself for not expecting a last-minute back-blading like this in the first place. Like father, like daughter...



And then, almost before she was ready for it, they pushed open one final door and stumbled into an open courtyard filled with yachts, small freighters, and rows of deadly, spine-winged starfighters. Midway across the yard, a single ship was just lifting off into the air.

A SoroSuub 3000 luxury yacht.

[Is that her?] H'sishi asked.

"Yes," Mara said sourly. Like father, like daughter, all right.

But there was no time now for the luxury of anger. "We'd better find a way out of here before Praysh gets what's left of his thugs organized," she told H'sishi. "Let's see if any of these other ships are unlocked—"

She paused, frowning. The yacht, contrary to her expectations, wasn't heading for the sky as fast as Sansia could push it. Instead, it had moved on repulsorlifts to a hovering position a few meters over the center of the courtyard.

And even as Mara wondered what in the worlds Sansia was doing, a pair of turbolaser blasts blazed outward from the underside of the craft into one of the parked starfighters, blowing it into a violent yellow fireball.

H'sishi snarled something Mara didn't catch over the roar of the flames. Still firing, the yacht swiveled slowly around in a circle, methodically turning the rest of Praysh's potential pursuit craft into scrap metal. Then, maneuvering across to where Mara and H'sishi stood, it dropped again to the ground and the hatch popped open. "I thought you two would never show up," Sansia's voice called impatiently from the direction of the bridge. "Come on, let's get out of here."



The guards who'd been watching the outside of Bardrin's mansion during Mara's first visit were nowhere to be seen as she and Sansia parked their landspeeder and headed inside.

And, as it turned out, for good reason.

"Welcome back, Mara," Karrde said, rising from his chair beside Bardrin's massive desk as Mara and Sansia entered. He was smiling, but Mara could sense the icy anger simmering beneath the pleasant

expression. "Excellent timing, as always. We've just secured the mansion, and I was about to start putting together an attack force to come after you." He half bowed to Sansia. "You must be Sansia Bardrin. Welcome home, as well."

"Thank you," Sansia said, nodding back. "I'm impressed—the people who designed this little fortress for my father claimed it would be impossible for anyone to take it. Not intact, at least."

"I had some professional assistance." Karrde looked at Bardrin, seated in glowering silence behind his desk. "As well as considerable motivation. You may want to explain to your father later that playing games with my people this way is not a way to maintain a long and healthy life."

"Don't worry," Sansia promised darkly. "He and I have a great deal to talk about. Starting with his willingness to leave me to rot in Praysh's slime pits as long as he got his precious *Winning Gamble* back."

"You wouldn't have been there more than another six hours," Bardrin rumbled. "I already had a team assembled to come in after you."

"Through Praysh's outer defenses?" Sansia snorted. "They'd have been cut to ribbons before they even hit atmosphere."

Mara cleared her throat. "Actually, I think you'll find he's been even more devious than you thought," she said, stretching out with the Force to Bardrin's mind. She had most of the pieces now, but his emotional reactions would help confirm she was putting them together in the right order. "I think he set you up deliberately to be captured by those pirates, knowing they'd send you and the *Winning Gamble* straight to Praysh."

Sansia frowned at her. "You can't be serious. What would he gain by that?"

Mara smiled tightly at Bardrin. "Some brand-new, high-tech prototypes Praysh stole from the Uoti Corporate."

Bardrin's expression remained solidly under control, but his guilty mental twitch was all the confirmation Mara needed. "I don't know what you're talking about," he growled.

"But continue anyway," Karrde invited, a sly smile touching his lips. Mara had been with him long enough, she knew, for him to recognize that she never used this tone of voice when she was just guessing. "This is most interesting."

Mara looked at Sansia. "You remember that Praysh mentioned it had only been a week since the Uoti theft. Your father heard about

It and decided to steal it from them before Uoti could get organized to retrieve it themselves. He knew that when the pirates gave you to Praysh they'd also give him the *Winning Gamble*; and so he rigged that fancy targeting system you told me about to make a complete sensor recording of Praysh's defense array on the flight in."

**Mara frowned.
"Are you throwing
me out?"**

Sansia's face had turned to glazed stone. "Why, you vac-hearted, manipulative nerf belly," she breathed, her eyes locked on her father's face like twin turbolasers. "You deliber-

ately put me *through* that—?"

"I thought someone of Jade's skills would have a better chance of getting out alone," Bardrin cut her off brusquely. "And she would have an easier time getting to the *Winning Gamble* from Praysh's audience chamber instead of the slave quarters, which is why I sent that anonymous tip suggesting he contact the Mrahash of Kvabja about the floater globe. Once we had the *Winning Gamble* and could analyze Praysh's outer defense array, our private troops could have swept in with ease, rescued you, *and* destroyed Praysh's operation in a single blow."

"And the Uoti prototypes?"

Bardrin shrugged. "A small bonus. A reward, if you like, for our civic-mindedness in eliminating a particularly noxious slaver. We *are* business people, Sansia."

He looked significantly at Karrde. "And I taught you better than to vent business disputes in front of outsiders."

"Yes, you certainly did." Sansia took a deep breath, then turned to look at Mara. "Whatever he promised to pay you, you deserve more. Name your price."



Mara looked coolly at Bardrin. "You can't afford to pay for what he put me through," she said. "But I'll settle for a copy of the *Winning Gamble's* tracking record. There's some serious justice I intend to rain on Praysh's head, and I don't think I want to trust your father to do it for me. Civic-minded or not."

Sansia threw a malicious smile at Bardrin. "I'll do better than that. Take the whole ship."

"*What?*" Bardrin leaped to his feet, oblivious to the blaster that had suddenly appeared in Karrde's hand. "Sansia, you are *not* going to give *my* ship to these—these—"

He sputtered to a halt. Sansia gave the silence a couple more heartbeats, then looked back at Mara. "You already know the access and operating codes," she continued as if her father hadn't spoken. "It's a good ship. Enjoy."

"Thank you," Mara said. "I will."

"There's also the matter of *my* fee," Karrde spoke up.

"What are you talking about?" Bardrin demanded. "She already gave Jade more than—"

"I'm not talking about payment for your daughter's rescue," Karrde cut him off coldly. "I'm referring to my fee for not killing you



outright over your kidnapping of my crew."

He looked at Sansia. "Unless you'd rather not make such a deal, of course. I can certainly take my fee in blood instead if you prefer."

"It *is* tempting," Sansia admitted. "But no, I'll deal with Daddy dear in my own way." She smiled thinly. "Out of sight of outsiders. What sort of fee do you want?"

"We'll work out something later," Karrde told her, putting his blaster away. "I'll be in touch. Come, Mara. It's time to get back to clean air again."

They left the room and headed through the strangely deserted mansion; and it was only as they were descending the final staircase toward the vestibule that Karrde's earlier comment about having had professional assistance finally became clear. Lurking in the shadow of a carved support pillar where he could cover both the stairway and the door was a silhouette she remembered all too well.

"I called in a few favors from Councilor Organa Solo," Karrde murmured in explanation from beside her. "It was a very profitable trade."

"Yes," Mara said, shivering involuntarily as they passed the Noghri warrior and headed down the stairway. "I'll just bet it was."



"Mara?"

Blowing a drop of sweat off the end of her nose, Mara keyed off the combat practice remote and shut down her lightsaber. "Come in," she called.

"Thought I'd find you here," Karrde said, glancing around the *Wild Karrde's* exercise room as he walked in. "H'sishi said you'd been spending a lot of time alone in here. Making angry sounds, was how she put it."

"I've been working out a few frustrations," Mara conceded, snagging a towel and wiping the moisture off her face. "How's she doing?"

"Mostly healed," Karrde said, crossing to one of the resistance benches and sitting down. "It was her very first time in a bacta tank, as it happens. She's rather impressed."

"We need to do more for her than just get her back to health," Mara said. "She really put her neck on the block when she brought my lightsaber into Praysh's palace."

"I agree," Karrde said. "Though oddly enough, she doesn't see it that way at all. She told me that once she found your lightsaber and realized you were a Jedi, she had no doubt at all that you could handle Praysh's legions with ease."

Mara grimaced. Jedi... "I trust you disabused her of that notion?"

"Not really. As far as I'm concerned, you're a Jedi in everything but name."

It wasn't that simple, Mara knew. Not nearly that simple. But it also wasn't a subject she wanted to get into right now. "Were you able to dig anything out of her as to what sort of reward she might like?" she asked instead. "I couldn't make any headway at all on that subject on our way off Torpris."

"According to her, all she's ever wanted was to get out of that demeaning scavenger life she'd been forced into," Karrde said. "It doesn't sound like she has much in the way of marketable skills, though, so I was thinking of offering her a course of study in starship operations at our training center on Quyste."

"I think she'd like that," Mara nodded. "She seemed fascinated with everything about the *Winning Gamble* during the flight."

"Good," Karrde said. "If she proves competent enough after her training, I thought I'd also see if she'd be interested in joining the organization." He smiled. "Though whether that would qualify as a reward or a punishment is probably debatable in some circles."

The smile faded. "Actually, I was wondering if you were finding yourself in one of those particular circles at the moment."

Mara felt her lip twist. "You do find convoluted ways to bring up these subjects, don't you?"

"It adds variety to conversation," he said. "Particularly when the other party to the discussion seems inclined to avoid the issue."

Mara sighed. "I don't know, Karrde. I've been feeling—I don't know. Squeezed, I suppose. The responsibilities have been weighing more and more on me lately, and this thing with Bardrin seems to have brought it all to a head. I don't like the fact that he picked on us in the first place because we were smugglers and couldn't go to the authorities over the kidnapping of the *Wild Karrde's* crew. And I really don't like the fact he was able to manipulate me so easily by threatening them that way."

She waved the lightsaber. "I feel like I need to get out somewhere."

Anywhere. At least for awhile."

"I understand," Karrde said quietly. "It is a crushing responsibility sometimes." He cocked an eyebrow. "Fortunately, like all good employers, I've come up with a possible solution. How would you like to go into business for yourself?"

Mara frowned. "Are you throwing me out?"

"Oh, no," Karrde assured her. "Certainly not unless you yourself want to leave. I was talking about setting you up with a small trading company of your own for awhile. A totally legitimate one, of course, which should help keep opportunists like Ja Bardrin off your back. You'd get a chance to relax away from the perennial intrigues and back-blading of the fringe, get some experience with small-business management, and possibly even gain a little more respect among the high-noses on Coruscant."

"That last one's pretty low on my list," Mara said, glowering down at her lightsaber. "What do you get out of it?"

Karrde waved a hand casually. "Oh, just the satisfaction of helping out a loyal and trusted colleague. And, of course, getting back a more experienced and relaxed lieutenant when you return to the organization."

"And if I decide not to come back?"

A muscle in Karrde's cheek twitched. "I would hate to lose you, Mara," he said quietly. "But I would also never try to hold onto you if you truly didn't want to stay. That's not how I do things."

Mara fingered her lightsaber. Freedom. Real, genuine freedom... "I suppose I could try it for awhile," she said at last. "Where would we pull the startup money and resources from?"

"From Sansia Bardrin, of course," Karrde said. "She still owes me, after all. And now that she has an effective veto over the family's business decisions, her father can hardly do anything to block it."

Mara shook her head in disbelief. "I really would have expected her to do a lot more to him than just appropriate some of his stock," she said. "Certainly given the way she was looking at him when we left."

"They're business people," Karrde pointed out. "That's what warfare looks like in those circles. And of course, you already have a ship. The *Winning Gamble*."

Mara blinked. "I thought that was the organization's."

"Sansia gave it to you, not the organization," Karrde reminded her. "And you're certainly not going to make a case that you didn't earn it."



"No," Mara murmured, an odd feeling trickling through her. She'd never owned her own ship before. Never. Even when she was the Emperor's Hand, all the ships and equipment she used were Imperial issue and property. Her own ship...

"Anyway, start thinking about what exactly you'll want and we can work out the details later," Karrde said, standing up. "I'll let you get back to your exercises now." He headed for the door—

"Karrde?" Dankin's voice came over the exercise room intercom. "You there?"

"Yes," Karrde called toward the speaker. "What is it?"

"We've got an incoming transmission from Luke Skywalker," Dankin said. "He reports the New Republic raid on Praysh's fortress is over and all the slaves have been rescued unharmed. He wants to thank you for sending him the defense array data, and to discuss your fee for it."

"Thank you," Karrde said. "Congratulate him, and tell him I'll be right there."

The intercom clicked off. "You sent *Luke* the data?" Mara asked. It didn't seem like the sort of thing a Jedi Master would get personally involved in.

"I thought he'd be able to move on it faster than if I tried going through the New Republic command structure," Karrde said. "Apparently, I was right."

"It must be terrible to be right so often," Mara murmured.

"It is a heavy burden," Karrde agreed with a smile. "One just has to learn to live with it. I'll see you later."

He left. Wiping her face again, Mara tossed the towel aside and ignited her lightsaber. A new job—even if it was only temporary—and her own ship. Her very own ship.

Though of course she would have to change its name. *Winning Gamble* sounded more like something Solo or Calrissian would use. No, she needed something more personal, something that would hearken back to what she'd gone through to earn it. The *Jade's Whip*, perhaps, or the *Jade's Sting*.

No. She smiled. The *Jade's Fire*.

Keying on the practice remote, feeling more relaxed than she had in weeks, she settled into combat stance and lifted her lightsaber. Yes, this was going to be interesting. Very interesting, indeed.



Roleplaying Game Sourcefile

Mara Jade

Type: Merc

DEXTERITY 3D+2

Blaster 9D+1, blaster: hold-out blaster 10D+1, brawling parry 7D+2, dodge 8D+2, lightsaber 4D+2, melee weapons 6D+2, pick pocket 8D+2, running 6D+2, thrown weapons 6D+2

KNOWLEDGE 2D+2

Alien species 8D+2, bureaucracy 7D+2, business 8D, intimidation 7D+2, languages 8D+2, planetary systems 6D, streetwise 7D+1, survival 9D+1, value 8D, willpower 7D

MECHANICAL 2D+2

Astrogation 8D+2, beast riding 5D+2, communications 6D+2, ground vehicle operation 6D+2, repulsorlift operations 5D+2, sensors 5D+2, space transports 9D+2, starfighter piloting 9D+2, starship gunnery 9D+2, starship shields 8D, swoop operation 7D+2

PERCEPTION 2D+1

Bargain 8D, command 7D+1, con 6D+1, forgery 4D+2, gambling 4D+1, hide 8D+2, investigation 5D, persuasion 5D+1, search 7D+1, sneak 8D+1

STRENGTH 3D+2

Brawling 6D+2, climbing/jumping 7D+2, lifting 5D+2, stamina 8D+2, swimming 6D+2

TECHNICAL 3D

Blaster repair 6D, computer programming/repair 7D, demolitions 5D+2, droid programming 3D+2, droid repair 3D+2, first aid 5D, ground vehicle repair 6D, repulsorlift repair 6D+1, starship weapons repair 5D+1

Special Abilities:

Force skills: Control 2D+2, sense 3D, alter 2D+1

Force powers (these are only powers Mara has demonstrated to this point):

Control: Absorb/dissipate energy, accelerate healing, control pain, emptiness, enhance attribute, hibernation trance, remain conscious, resist stun
Sense: Danger sense, life detection, life sense, magnify senses, receptive telepathy, sense Force

Alter: Injure/kill, telekinesis

Control and Sense: Projective telepathy

Control and Alter: Inflict pain

Control, Sense, and Alter: Telekinetic kill



This character is Force sensitive.

Force Points: 4

Dark Side Points: 3

Character Points: 30

Move: 10

Equipment: Hold-out blaster (3D), comlink, lightsaber (5D)

← **Capsule:** Mara Jade has served aboard the crew of the *Wild Karrde* for several years now. She was previously in the service of the Empire, an assassin and highly-skilled operative by name of the Emperor's Hand. During the resurgence of Imperial forces under Grand Admiral Thrawn, she ultimately met with her master's nemesis, Luke Skywalker. After some initial hostilities the two eventually became acquaintances, and Mara has begun some training as a Jedi. She now wields Skywalker's original lightsaber—his father's—and serves as Talon Karrde's able lieutenant.

Mara Jade is a striking human female with red-gold hair and high cheekbones. She is exceptionally athletic and is a formidable adversary in combat—or, for that matter, in any situation. She has been an invaluable asset to both Karrde's crew and to the New Republic during key struggles over the years. Lately, however, the pressures of leadership and other stresses she can't quite put a name to have weighed on her considerably.

Mara Jade Sourcefile

To read about Mara Jade and Talon Karrde's first meeting, check out "First Contact" in *The Best of the Star Wars Adventure Journal* or in Bantam Spectra's *Tales from the Empire* anthology.

For more information about Mara Jade during Grand Admiral Thrawn's campaign, read *Heir to the Empire*, *Dark Force Rising*, and *The Last Command*, and refer to the *Thrawn Trilogy Sourcebook*. The *Jedi Academy Trilogy Sourcebook* details Mara and her involvement in the Smuggler's Alliance during the struggle against Admiral Daala's forces. *Cracken's Threat Dossier* provides information about Mara during the time of the Corellian Trilogy (*Ambush at Corellia*, *Assault at Selonia*, and *Showdown at Centerpoint*).

To see more of Mara Jade, Talon Karrde, H'sishi and the crew of the *Wild Karrde* in action, check out *Specter of the Past*, the first volume of *Hand of Thrawn*. Look for the second book, *Vision of the Future*, to be published by Bantam Spectra in late 1998.



Ja Bardrin

Type: Industrialist

DEXTERITY 2D+1

Blaster 4D+1, dodge 3D+1

KNOWLEDGE 3D+2

Allen species 4D+2, bureaucracy 4D+2, bureaucracy: Bardrin Group 8D+2, business 7D, business: Bardrin Group 9D+2, cultures 4D, intimidation 5D+2, languages 4D+2, planetary systems 4D+1, streetwise 5D+2, value 4D+2, value: ship systems 7D+2, value: weapons 8D+2, willpower 5D+2

MECHANICAL 2D+1

Astrogation 3D+1, capital ship gunnery 4D, communications 4D+1, repulsorlift operation 3D+1, sensors 4D+1, space transports 3D+1, starship gunnery 4D+1

PERCEPTION 3D+2

Bargain 7D+2, command 6D+2, command: Bardrin Group 8D+2, con 7D, gambling 5D, persuasion 5D+2

STRENGTH 2D+2

Brawling 3D+2

TECHNICAL 3D+1

Capital ship weapon repair 4D+1, computer programming/repair 5D, security 3D+2, starship weapon repair 4D+1

Force Points: 1

Dark Side Points: 2

Character Points: 12

Move: 9

Equipment: Comlink, datapad, remote access unit

← **Capsule:** Ja Bardrin is a prominent businessman; one of the few who managed to not only weather the Galactic Civil War and the collapse of the Empire, but actually profit from it. His company, the Bardrin Group, has a deep-seated rivalry with Uoti Corporate: the two are constantly at odds over weapon and ship systems markets. Bardrin lost a bid to be the exclusive distributor for Fabritech in the Aparo and Wyl sectors over three years ago, and is still fighting the decision.

Stubborn, egotistical, and devoted to self and the bottom line above all else, Ja is a large, middle-aged human male with a powerful voice and a commanding presence.

Bardrin Group versus Uoti Corporate

The rivalry between Bardrin Group and Uoti Corporate has raged for more than 20 standard years. Both companies distribute the weapons and ship systems of the major corporations in many sectors, and also develop their own products.

The Bardrin-Uoti hostilities have erupted into violence on more than one occasion; clashes between the two entities in the Ansuroer sector some years ago resulted in significant legal troubles for both companies. The chief officers of Bardrin Group and Uoti Corporate are known for their ferocity in business. Both are also suspected to have strong relationships with underworld figures and organizations. In the days of the Rebellion, Bardrin Group had a significant advantage over Uoti due to an exceptionally profitable relationship with several outfits that were later learned to have been linked to Black Sun.

The turf war for marketing, distribution, advertisement and respect drives both groups to combat one another even in markets they aren't all that interested in: better to hold a worthless market than let your enemy gain any ground.

Following the Alliance victory at Endor, both companies have scrambled to establish strong relations with the growing Republic bureaucracy, while still maintaining their profitable relations with Imperial-allied corporations in other regions. So far, it appears Uoti Corporate is ahead in this struggle, and they'll be the first to inform you of that fact.

Both companies frequently hire smugglers and bounty hunters for various "business ventures."

Ghi Trade Language

There are a number of trade languages throughout the galaxy; nearly all were developed so merchants (legitimate and otherwise) could communicate with one another regardless of their native tongues.

One of the more common languages is Ghi. It is used heavily in the Outer Rim Territories and outlying areas of the New Republic, particularly by smuggler elements. It is seldom used in regions still held by the Empire.

Unlike Old Corellian, Tal'inora, and other such trade languages, Ghi is used by many species. Its construction is such that most species can pronounce the words, though some—like Togorians and Tiss'shar—have some difficulty, while others—like the Wookiees and Gamorreans—are unable to speak the language at all.

Sansia Bardrin

Type: Corporate Ancillary

DEXTERITY 2D+1

Blaster 3D+1, dodge 4D+1

KNOWLEDGE 3D+2

Alien species 4D, bureaucracy

4D+1, business 4D+2, busi-

ness: Bardrin Group 6D

MECHANICAL 3D+1

Space transports 5D, starship

gunnery 4D+1

PERCEPTION 3D

Bargain 4D, command 4D, con

4D+2

STRENGTH 2D+2

Stamina 3D+2

TECHNICAL 3D

Computer programming/re-

pair 4D, security 4D

Force Points: 1

Character Points: 9

Move: 10

Equipment: Blaster (4D),

comlink, datapad.

← **Capsule:** Sansia Bardrin is a young human female in her early twenties, and Ja Bardrin's



only child: as such, she displays many of the bitter qualities of being a billionaire's sole daughter. She is not exceptionally enthralled with the business climate her father revels in—and has little interest in the Bardrin-Uoti rivalry—but she certainly has Bardrin blood in her, as she can be quite tenacious.

Sansia is a capable pilot and has an eye for detail; three traits have prompted her father to on occasion use her for assignments relevant to his business. Her last venture to the ports of Makksre is one she'll likely not forget—nor forgive—for quite some time.

Chay Praysh

Type: Drach'nam Lord

DEXTERITY 2D+2

Blaster 5D+2, dodge 4D+2, brawling parry 5D+2, grenade 4D

KNOWLEDGE 3D+1

Allen species 5D+1, bureaucracy 4D+1, business 5D+1, cultures 3D+2, intimidation 5D, languages 4D, planetary systems 4D+1, survival 5D+1, streetwise 7D, survival

4D+1, survival: cavernous 7D+1, value 5D+1, value: slaves 7D+1

MECHANICAL 2D

Astrogation 3D, beast riding 3D, jet pack operation 4D, spacetransports 4D, starship gunnery 4D, starship shields 3D, swoop operation 5D

PERCEPTION 4D

Bargain 5D, command 6D, command: Drach'nam slavers 7D+1, con 4D+2, gambling 5D, hide 5D, persuasion 5D, search 5D, sneak 4D+2

STRENGTH 4D

Brawling 7D, lifting 6D, stamina 6D

TECHNICAL 2D

Computer programming/repair 4D+1, security 3D

Special Abilities:

Vision: The Drach'nam's vision includes the ability to see in the infrared spectrum. They can see in darkness with no penalty, provided there are heat sources.

Force Points: 1

Dark Side Points: 4

Character Points: 12

Move: 10

Equipment: Blaster (4D), jeweled scepter (STR+2)



Capsule: Chay Praysh is a ruthless criminal whose rise to prominence in the years after the Battle of Endor has been substantial. A Drach'nam male who relishes in his self-styled image of royalty, Praysh despises most all beings who are not his own kind. His slaves are almost exclusively human, and only the rare non-Drach'nam is given any semblance of responsibility in his organization (the Bith physician in

his employ is one of those few). His obvious contempt for female humans has never been explained, but there is no doubt among those under his command that he is a true, pink-blooded Drach'nam—he's smart, vicious, and powerful.

Drach'nam Guard. All stats are 2D except: *Dexterity 3D, blaster 3D+2, melee combat 4D, melee combat: neuronc whip 4D+2, Strength 4D+1, brawling 6D+1, lifting 6D, stamina 5D+1.* Move: 12. Neuronc whip (STR+1D or 5D stun), combat knife (STR+1D+2, hilt STR+2), blaster (4D).

Praysh Palace

Chay Praysh's mansion and grounds in Kalthis City appear the typical wealth-laden abode from the slum streets that surround it, but the interior is as foreboding and dark as any Drach'nam sub-building on La'drach. The hallways are essentially high bore-tunnels, with secret cameras and concealed ceiling defense systems laden with spikes and razorwire. The cold floors are fashioned largely from stone.

Praysh's throne room features heavy walls and an even heavier contingent of Drach'nam guards. The throne rests on a dais fitted with a revolving mechanism.

In the interest of maintaining a secure estate, Praysh keeps several adult krizar loose on his grounds and many of his guards on patrol. There are also two Espo walkers for the infrequent urban riots that might pour over onto his immaculate grounds. Praysh keeps a sizable fleet of (largely stolen) starfighters, freighters and other ships. There is also a trio of atmospheric defense cannons that can defend the estate from attacking fighters—New Republic squadrons or rival criminal groups.

Drach'nam

Attribute Dice: 12D

DEXTERITY 1D/3D+2

KNOWLEDGE 1D/2D+2

MECHANICAL 1D/3D

PERCEPTION 1D/3D

STRENGTH 2D+2/5D+1

TECHNICAL 1D/2D+1

Special Abilities:

Vision: The Drach'nam's vision includes the ability to see in the infrared spectrum. They can see in darkness with no penalty, provided there are heat sources.

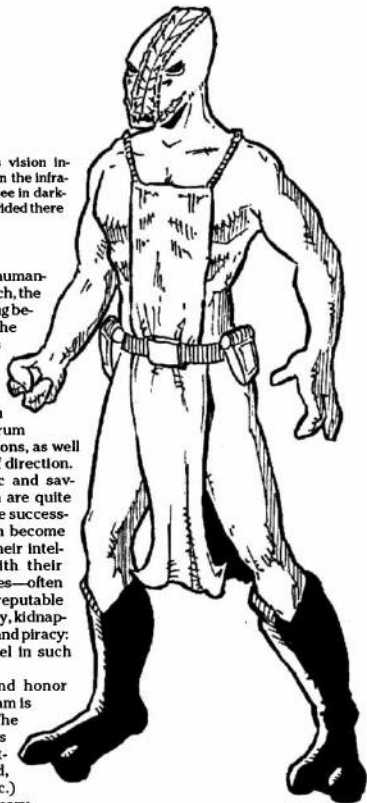
Move: 10/13

Size: 1.9-2.3 meters

Capsule: Massive humanoids native to La'drach, the Drach'nam are strong beings that evolved in the intricate cave-cities of their world. Living in the dark caves gave them their ability to see in the infrared spectrum and in regular environs, as well as a strong sense of direction.

Though barbaric and savage, the Drach'nam are quite intelligent, and more successful Drach'nam often become cunning leaders. Their intellect—combined with their often cruel tendencies—often leads them into disreputable fields such as slavery, kidnapping, assassination and piracy: the Drach'nam excel in such endeavors.

Societal rank and honor among the Drach'nam is very important. The many levels and titles used (First Greatness, Primary Guard, Tertiary Advisor, etc.) often seem unnecessary to non-Drach'nam, but their use assures a given Drach'nam knows his place and *stays* in his place, in so far as status is concerned.



Si'rin Blath

Type: Bith Physician *rom*

DEXTERITY 2D

Blaster 3D, dodge 3D

KNOWLEDGE 4D

Alien species 5D, alien species: Drach'nam 6D, alien species: humans 7D, cultures 5D

MECHANICAL 2D

PERCEPTION 3D+2

Bargain 4D, investigation 3D

STRENGTH 2D

Lifting 3D

TECHNICAL 4D+1

Computer programming/repair 4D+2, first aid 6D, (A) medicine 5D

Special Abilities:

Vision: Bith have the ability to focus on microscopic objects, giving them a +1D to *Perception* skills involving objects less than 30 centimeters away. However, as a consequence of this, the Bith have become extremely myopic. They suffer a penalty of -1D for any visual-based action more than 20 meters away and cannot see more than 40 meters under any circumstances.

Scent: Bith have well-developed senses of smell, giving them a +1D to all *Perception* skills when pertaining to actions and people within three meters.

Manual Dexterity: Bith gain a +1D bonus to the performance of fine motor skills—picking pockets, surgery, fine tool operation, etc.—but not to gross motor skills such as *blaster* and *dodge*.

Note: For more information on the Bith, refer to *Galaxy Guide 4: Alien Races*.

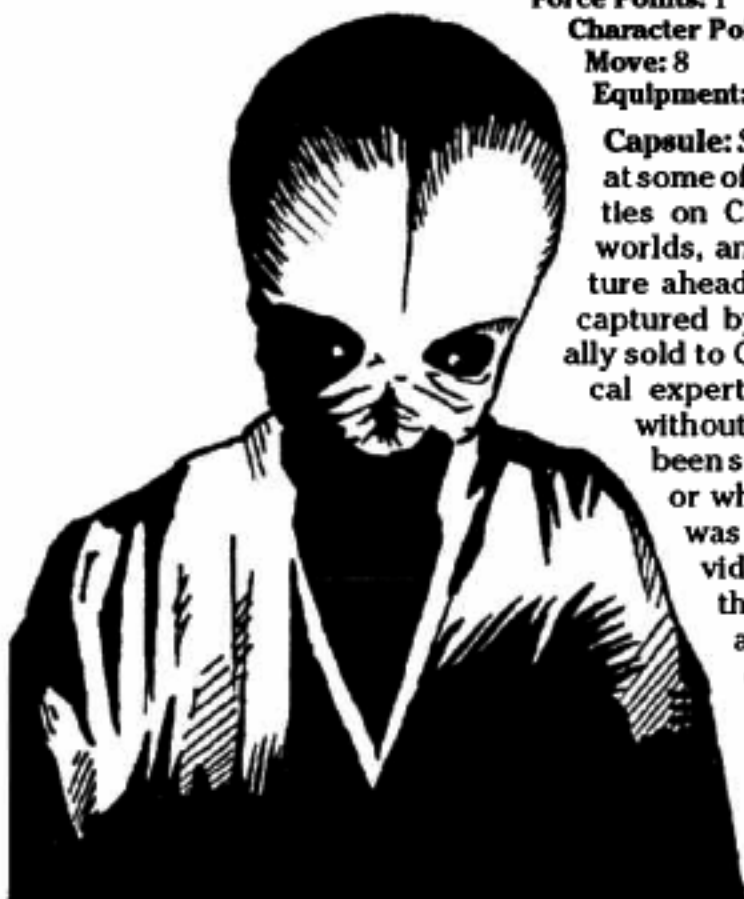
Force Points: 1

Character Points: 12

Move: 8

Equipment: Diagnostic computer

Capsule: Si'rin Blath was trained at some of the best medical facilities on Clak'dor VII and other worlds, and had a promising future ahead of him when he was captured by slavers and eventually sold to Chay Praysh. His medical expertise proved an asset; without it, he likely would have been sold to the Kessel mines or who knows where. Chay was "kind" enough to provide Blath a position at the crime lord's mansion and krizar breeding pits on Torpis. As krizar harvesting is a dangerous endeavor, medical attention is often necessary to prevent "collateral damage" (slave injuries).



Blath is technically not a slave, as he receives a meager salary for his work...but he knows he cannot quit his job without serious consequences. The Bith physician is a kind being with a refined bedside manner, and though he would never voice his thoughts aloud, he waits for the day he can escape. He hopes Praysh's estate is overrun by rivals, the Sector Patrol, or even a New Republic strike team.

Krizar (pupal stage)

Type: Developing predator

DEXTERITY 1D

PERCEPTION 1D

STRENGTH 1D

Special Abilities:

Bite: The krizar pupae's "palp" is a fierce collection of tiny, locking teeth. When a krizar sinks its teeth into something at this stage, it does only 1D damage, but has a *Strength* of 5D+2 to hold itself in place, and typically must be removed surgically.

Shell: The hard, ellipsoid shell of the krizar pupae provides the developing krizar with an additional 1D+2 defense against physical damage.

Move: 3

Size: 4–8 centimeters long

Krizar (adult stage)

Type: Predator

DEXTERITY 3D

PERCEPTION 3D

Tracking 5D

STRENGTH 4D

Brawling 5D+2

Special Abilities:

Bite: The bite of a krizar does 4D+1 damage for the first round, and an additional 1D damage for every round the creature stays clamped to its victim. The krizar's clamping jaw has a staying *Strength* of 7D. Killing the creature will not release the jaw.

Claws: A krizar's foreclaws do STR+1 physical damage.

Dew Claw: The krizar's sheathed dew claw on all four of its hind legs can sink nearly a full half-meter into the ground, effectively anchoring the creature and whatever hapless being it has sunk its teeth into. The dew claws provide the krizar a +2D *Strength* bonus to resist being moved. Killing the creature will not weaken the dew claws' hold.

Move: 14

Size: 0.75–1.2 meters at the shoulder

Capsule: Sometimes referred to as "clampjaws," the krizar are fierce animals used by many estates and compounds as guard creatures. The creatures are indigenous to Torpis; there are some analogous species that inhabit Vodran and other marsh-like worlds, but the krizar are the most vicious, and are exported to other systems for a hefty price. During their pupae stage the krizar are sustained by a viscous gray sludge that flows throughout many of the subterranean caverns of Torpis. Krizar are now bred and slave-harvested in large numbers by many unscrupulous beings, Chay Praysh among them.

The vicious maw of a krizar is often enough to sway a potential adversary; those unfortunate enough to be bitten by the creature have

little chance of escape, as the clamping mandible of the krizar is nearly impossible to pry loose. The creature also has long, resilient dew claws that effectively anchor the creature in place, preventing a larger creature from simply dragging the krizar away. Even if the animal is killed, it is still exceptionally difficult for the victim to escape; upon death, the krizar's system is flooded by a chemical that effectively locks the creature in place.

Torpis

Type: Terrestrial

Temperature: Temperate

Atmosphere: Type I (breathable)

Hydrosphere: Moderate

Gravity: Standard

Terrain: Mountain, Urban

Length of Day: 23 hours

Length of Year: 328 days

Sapient Species: Drach'nam, humans, Rodians, others

Starport: Stellar

Population: 1.4 billion

Planet Function: Mining, Trade

Government: Guilds

Tech Level: Space

Major Exports: Krizar, mercenaries, minerals

Major Imports: Foodstuffs, mining equipment

Capsule: Torpis was settled centuries ago as a colony world for those in the mining and support industries when the Kolris Belt was found to have massive cerellium reserves. Commerce and settlements grew quickly, and after more valuable resources were discovered in Torpis' mountains, the influx of beings from all over the galaxy was huge.

Ultimately, the cerellium reserves were depleted, and those valuable minerals on Torpis were replaced by more advanced compounds. Torpis began a slow, downward spiral and became a relatively poor world with an exceptionally diverse population. In recent decades, renewed commerce has revitalized the world with the establishment of a major trade route nearby, but many regions of the world—particularly the urban areas—are still rife with poverty and despair. Beggars of all species crowd the streets.

Many of the mansions and grounds of underworld figures are located in these decaying urban slums, Chay Praysh's among them.

Within several of Torpis' underground caverns one can find the infamous slime pits and muck "streams" the kizar breed in.

BlastHand

Model: BioTech BlastHand

Type: Concealed carpal blaster unit

Scale: Character

Skill: Blaster

Cost: 1,300

Availability: 4, R, X

Damage: 4D

Game Notes: The BlastHand should be treated as a regular blaster for game purposes, though the weapon is surgically attached to the user's arm and he can not be disarmed without restraining that arm. There is a port for blaster packs and recharging.

Capsule: BioTech's BlastHand is relatively uncommon, but very effective. The "hand" is a prosthetic shell that has some dexterity; it is primarily a shell for the compact blaster housed within—most users can clench their fist or point their fingers, but do little else. Many unscrupulous beings who have lost their natural hand—like those in Ja Bardrin's employ—find BlastHands useful for gaining a decisive advantage over adversaries with little worry of a draw.

Jade's Fire (Winning Gamble)

Craft: SoroSuub Luxury 3000

Type: Modified Private Space Yacht

Scale: Starfighter

Length: 50 meters

Skill: Space transports: SoroSuub Luxury 3000

Crew: 1

Crew Skill: see Mara Jade

Passengers: 10

Cargo Capacity: 100 metric tons

Consumables: 1 month

Hyperdrive Multiplier: x2

Hyperdrive Backup: x14

Nav Computer: Yes

Maneuverability: 1D

Space: 8

Atmosphere: 365; 1,050 kmh

Hull: 4D

Shields: 4D

Sensors:

Passive: 30/1D

Scan: 80/2D

Search: 100/3D

Focus: 4/4D

Weapons:

Three Quad Turbolasers (fire separately)

Fire Arc: 1 front, 1 left, 1 right

Skill: Starship gunnery

Fire Control: 2D

Space Range: 3–15/35/75

Atmosphere Range: 300–1.5/3.5/7.5 km

Damage: 5D

One "Shoot-Back" Blaster

Fire Arc: Turret

Skill: Starship gunnery (when operated manually)

Fire Control: 2D

Space Range: 1–5/10/17

Atmosphere Range: 100–500/1/1.7 km

Damage: 2D

Tractor Beam Projector

Fire Arc: Front
Skill: Starship gunnery
Fire Control: 2D
Space Range: 1-3/7/15
Atmosphere Range: 100-300/700/1.5 km
Damage: 2D

← **Capsule:** The *Winning Gamble* is a highly-modified craft the Bardrin Group stole from a SoroSuub executive some time ago. Many of the systems (including the shoot-back system) were such advanced prototypes at the time that they are still cutting-edge. The craft has been outfitted even further since its theft, most notably with an advanced sensor/cam system for covert surveillance. Now under the ownership of Mara Jade and known as *Jade's Fire*, new systems will certainly be added and existing systems improved.

Game statistics and information created by Craig Robert Carey based on Timothy Zahn's "Jade Solitaire."

SPECIAL OPS!

Imperial garrisons—stark and foreboding structures—dominate the landscape where ever they are constructed.

They are symbols of the Empire's might. They are protected by all manner of lethal defenses. From roving patrols and death fences to turbolaser batteries and TIE fighter flybys, every possible resource is used to ensure that the facility remains invulnerable.

To approach them is sheer folly—to attack is suicide. To get inside you would need an army—or—just one Special Ops team specialized in...

THE ART OF INFILTRATION

By John Beyer & Kathy Burdette

Illustrations by Joe Corroney

Infiltrating Imperial garrisons is not a science—it's an art. The ability to stealthily gain admittance to these imposing facilities is paramount to missions of sabotage, espionage, or rescue. However, there are no clear-cut rules to guarantee success, no secret formulas that can be applied every time. There are only time tested guidelines and helpful tips from seasoned professionals, which if practiced increase the chance for success.



"How are we going to do this?" Maglenna asked, shielding her eyes in the afternoon sun. She and Major Haathi were sitting on a ratty service blanket at the edge of the forest.

Above them, the sky was turning a brownish-purple with the onset of evening; beyond them lay the object of their latest mission—an Imperial supply depot under heavy construction, tucked behind a network of impassable obstacles. First there was a three-story, fully-charged mesh-link fence surrounding the property; then there was a suspicious expanse of freshly-dug earth; then there was a massive hill, whose sides had been blasted away until they were glass-smooth and whose top was covered in heavy-laser turrets; and finally there was the depot itself, an assorted group of duracrete buildings situated next to what was supposed to be a tiny landing strip. Except that the tiny landing strip was now a massive network of landing pads, with a steady stream of freighters and starships coming and going. From there, Major Haathi's team was supposed to hijack a super freighter filled with supplies.

Two weeks earlier, Haathi had come up with a brilliant plan to get inside. However, that was when she had been under the impression that Alliance intelligence reports were correct.

"So, General Madine, are you sure the surveillance reports are accurate?" "Oh, surely, Major!" Haathi said, opening up a large cold-storage medkit and rummaging around. "There's no security! Just a little two-meter mesh fence, two guards, and about a hundred construction workers!" "Wow, thank you, sir!"

Maglenna said nothing. She hadn't worked with Haathi for very long, but so far she had observed that whenever Haathi started ranting, it meant she was thinking. Which, according to legend, was often a very dangerous thing.

Morgan didn't seem to think so. She was sitting in a collapsible chair at the top of a small hill, just beyond Maglenna and Haathi. Her jacket was around her waist and she was leaning back, wearing mirrorshades, taking in the sun. Maglenna envied Morgan's unflagging trust in whatever Haathi did.

Currently Haathi was taking large metal cylinders out of the medkit and setting them in front of her on the blanket.

"What do we do now?" Maglenna asked her.

Haathi waved one of the cylinders. "This part of the plan stays the same. We get into the low-security portion exactly the way we planned."

"And once we get in? Assuming we get in... How do we get into the high-security sector?"

"I'm working on it." She offered the cylinder to Maglenna. "Savareen brandy?"

"No, thank you—"

Haathi set it down in front of Maglenna and poured the thick, clear contents into the lid. "Then just leave it there for effect."

"Major—"

"T'Charek."

"T'Charek. I know I haven't been a member of this team very long, but—"

"You're already the best medtech we've had. Our last one would be running for home about now."

"Well, frankly, that's crossed my mind."

"Hey, mine, too." Haathi opened a couple of metal containers and emptied their sloppy brown contents onto a plate.

"What is that stuff?"

"Takeout," Haathi said, shoving a plate at Maglenna. The food gave off a strong, moldy smell, and Maglenna declined to pick up the fork that Haathi chucked at her. "I think it's supposed to be a knockoff of some Rodian dish."

A short distance behind Maglenna, there was a sound of twigs breaking, and several voices.

Maglenna tried not to notice; the voices had been anticipated. They were an important part of the original plan.

"T'Charek," Maglenna said. "There's something I've been wanting to ask you."

"Now?" a deep voice said, from up in the trees.

"No," Morgan replied without looking up.

"What do you want to know?" Haathi asked Maglenna, tossing three more plates onto the blanket as if she were dealing cards.

"Shouldn't I have gotten more training?"

Haathi sipped the brandy. "Interesting question."

"I'm only saying, I went straight from receiving my orders to preparing for this mission. Shouldn't I have been sent to comlink school, or advanced blaster training, or—"

"You're in school now," Haathi said.



"Seriously. Come on, now," Maglenna said. She had been trying very hard not to get exasperated, but Haathi's seat-of-her-pants technique had already exceeded the crazy rumors Maglenna had been hearing about Special Ops leaders in general. Still, Maglenna didn't like hearing herself complain. "Don't be afraid to sound patronizing," she told Haathi. "I have to learn somehow."

Haathi set down the last of the plates and looked right at Maglenna. Haathi's eyes were her only serious features; the rest of her was always melted into some chair or slouching against some doorframe, one arm raised to emphasize some irreverent point she was making, and the other dangling laconically. And half a grin on her face at all times. You got the impression that you could go right up to her anytime and she'd want to sit down with you, talk with you, buy you a drink. But when she trained her black eyes on you and stared, you suddenly felt as though there weren't enough room in the whole galaxy to hide from her. You could be a rookie pilot or you could be a general. You just shrank away. Which Maglenna did, even as Haathi calmly said, "Maglenna, you do not need to be patronized."

"Now?" the voice in the trees said again.

"No," Morgan said.

"Listen," Haathi said, mercifully diverting her eyes to the cooler for a second, "I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, 'Oh, dear, my C.O. has lost her little mind because she's still going to try to get inside.' The fact is, it doesn't matter how well you plan. Something always..." She glanced over Maglenna's shoulder. "Here we go."

Maglenna started, but she didn't turn around; the voices had been getting gradually closer, and now they stopped. For a few seconds everything was dead quiet, except for a few birds chirping in the distance. Maglenna's back twitched.

Then Morgan spoke in a jarringly cheerful tone. "Hi, boys!"

"Ma'am," said one of the voices. Maglenna turned around; five Imperial army troopers—a sergeant, three privates, and a corporal—stood about 10 meters behind her, blaster rifles slung around their backs.

The sergeant removed his hat.

"Afternoon, ladies," he said.

"Gentlemen," Haathi said. Maglenna forced a pleasant smile and held out the brandy lid in the lieutenant's direction.

"No, thank you," he said. "Mind telling me what you're doing here?"

"What, is it private property?"

"Ma'am, you're a mite close to a restricted area."

"But we're not in it, are we?"

"No, ma'am."

Haathi demonstratively set down her fork. She widened her black eyes, which were suddenly all innocence and no threat.

"Listen, uh...General?"

He chuckled. "Sergeant."

"Sergeant, we promise we'll clean everything up when we go. I know there's designated picnic areas by the lake, but it's so lush right here. It's getting so you can't go anyplace where there's trees and grass anymore, you know? These days it's all, 'plow it down, build a city, who cares about nature.' Well, you know what? I care!"

"Okay, okay, don't get excited. I'm just informing you that if you go any further beyond the hill where your pretty friend is sitting—" Morgan shyly wagged her fingers at him—"then we'll have to escort you out of the woods. For your own safety, you understand."

"Are you guys police?" Morgan asked.

"Kind of."

One of the privates spoke. "What are you girls having?"

"Did you want some?" Haathi asked.

"Oh, no, that's okay—"

"No, really! Have some supper! I made this myself." She held up a plate, oozing over with Rodian food.

The sergeant squinted. "Looks like takeout."

"What? I slaved over this all morning!"

"I'll have some," the corporal said, stepping forward a couple of paces.

Haathi leaned suggestively against the medkit. "Just you?" she asked.

The other four soldiers stepped forward.

Morgan said, "Now."

There was a rustling of leaves and a light clicking noise from the tree Morgan had been addressing, and a few leaves shook to the ground; then, all five of the Imperial officers clapped their hands to their necks almost simultaneously.

"Hey! Something bit me—" one of them shouted, and then fell to the ground along with the others.

A few moments later, Captain Jayme swung down to the tree's lowest branch, his face smeared with green paint and his new rifle strapped to his back, and dropped to the ground.

"Geez!" he said. "I thought they'd never stand together!" He tossed the rifle, a light little carbine assembly, at Morgan. "It pulls to the left," he said. "Fix it."

"Hey!" Morgan cried, almost tripping over her feet to catch it. "Be careful! This is not one of your mongrel assembly-line blasters! It's fragile!"

Haathi got to her feet and surveyed the officers, whose pulses were already being assessed by Maglenna. She crouched down by each one, placed a hand on each neck, and gingerly felt around. Everyone was warm, but their hearts were pumping nice and slow.

"They're all out," she said.

Haathi shook her head. "People like that should not be allowed into restricted areas." She looked up. "Maglenna, get their stuff. Jayme, you get our stuff. Morgan, help me dispose of our picnic here."

Maglenna hesitated; if there was a process to stripping downed enemy forces, she didn't know what it was. But, she figured the team probably needed everything. She got their jackets, their pants, their belts, their holsters, their boots, and in each breast pocket there was an Ident badge.

Jayme appeared next to her as she slipped into the corporal's jacket. "You need this," he said, and strapped her into a black shoulder holster containing a brand-new holdout blaster. This was her weapon of choice and Jayme had spent the past two weeks teaching her how to use it properly. She had already been trained in marksmanship when she first joined the Alliance, but Jayme had insisted that she know how to enter a room, how to move with cover fire, how to disarm an opponent, how to take stairs and corridors. He made her take her blaster apart and put it back together several times while the team was in hyperspace.

Nobody made any attempt to disguise that she had a medkit, although this one was Imperial-issue and had been acquired for the Rebellion long ago. It also had a DL-44 blaster sitting heavily in the bottom. Jayme's insistence, again.

Within minutes, everyone was armed and ready. Morgan and Haathi had rolled the remains of the picnic—and the uniform of the fifth Imperial trooper—into the blanket, and stuffed the whole package into a large receptacle that said, "Thank You for Keeping Our Woods Clean" at the base of the hill. The troopers were left by the receptacle, all linked together by their own restraining binders. Haathi led the team a short distance into the woods, where the

Imperials' patrol speeder was waiting.

"I'm driving," Jayme announced.

Maglenna looked in the direction of the garrison again. The sky was turning dark blue with the onset of dusk, and the garrison still seemed flat, but this time in a harmless way. "Wow," she said to Haathi. "I can't wait to see what you've planned to do once we get inside."

"I'm kind of curious myself," Haathi said, hopping into the front passenger seat. "Drive on, Jayme."



Spontaneous Planning

If there is one lesson that Special Ops members have learned, it is that no plan survives contact with the enemy. What often looks good in the simulator will never work in the field. This is not the result of poor planning, but rather a combination of missing information, third-party intervention, bad luck, and a host of other unknown factors, that quickly overwhelm even the best made plans. As a result team members often understand the general idea of what they must do, but have no detailed plan of exactly how they will do it.

This does not mean that Special Ops teams never plan; instead, they recognize that they must be able to alter, scrap, or reinvent their plans at a moment's notice. With a little bravado, a smattering of smarts, and a lot of preparation, Special Ops members let their instincts take over and become masters of improvisation.

As Players

Terms like off the cuff, by the wire, and playing it by ear are commonly used by players to describe how they tackle most adventures. It is the nature of role-playing that the players are not actually soldiers, pilots, and Rebels living in a galaxy far away. They do not really know how to break into a Death Star, or how often stormtroopers report in from their posts—nor do they have access to other information that might be common knowledge to a real Rebel.

As a result there is no real way that players can develop exhaustive plans and counter-plans unless the gamemaster is ready to

Captain Jayme's Infiltration FAQ

Q: Is every Imperial armed?

A: No. Other than troopers or security forces on actual duty, there are very few Imperial personnel who are actually issued weapons. Even fewer carry them at all times. The sheer cost of issuing weapons to each person would bankrupt the Empire, and without constant battle training most would be an endangerment to their own forces in a shootout. Remember that an unarmed Imperial will be less inclined to act the hero, and you'd be surprised how cooperative they become when you hold the only weapon.

Q: Who is armed?

A: Security forces. Troopers on station or patrol. Bodyguards to high-ranking officers. All ISB agents at all times, and high-ranking officers in the field or during official ceremonies.

Q: What is the status of females and aliens in the Imperial military?

A: Currently, human males dominate the Imperial forces by a 100-to-one ratio over females and non-humans. Non-humans are usually assigned duties to remote garrisons where they will not have the opportunity to cause trouble, or where their unique talents benefit the Empire the most. Most female officers do not advance as far as they would have in the Old Republic Forces, and very few ever reach the coveted ranks of admiral or general. COMPNOR forces are the exception. Here aliens are almost non-existent, but the ratio of males to females drops to eight-to-one. Because of the low frequency of women and non-humans in the Empire, human males are typically used when infiltrating Imperial facilities...but there are always exceptions.

provide mountains of information. This is not really a bad thing; in fact, it is very much in the tone of the Star Wars movies. Breaking Leia out of the Death Star is a classic example of spontaneous planning. Luke's hunt for Yoda starts off with no more planning than a feeling he must go to Dagobah. And the Rebels well-laid-out plan to destroy the shield generator on Endor proves useless upon contact with an Imperial scout patrol. Only through improvisation do the movie heroes manage to succeed in the end.

Q: Isn't Imperial security too tight to breach, even at small installations?

A: Most facilities are so large that maintaining absolute security in common areas is next to impossible. Ident badges and keycards are usually all that is required to pass through the initial security measures. Guards will still detain those without proper ID or who act out-of-place. Code key cylinders contain encrypted passwords and personal data that is used to access more secure areas. Most doors and computers are linked to the station's main security net; invalid passwords or data should trigger some sort of alarm. It is interesting to note that handheld security scanners are not tied into the main net (to much risk of tampering) and are used only to read the information contained on the cylinder. The security officer must assume that the information is valid, and he relies on his own judgement to decide whether it should be accepted or not. Don't give a security officer any reason to be suspicious!

Q: Should I travel heavy or light?

A: Both. Pack plenty of useful gear, but take only what you think will be really essential to authenticate your disguise. Too much gear will bog you down, and the wrong type for the mission will get you killed.

Q: How can I prepare for the unexpected?

A: You can't. So be flexible. Have a plan but be prepared to modify it on a moment's notice. Analyze your options and your chances to succeed. Never be afraid to abandon the mission or the obvious goal. When possible change your mission priorities and parameters. Success is subjective. Walk away alive!



As Gamemasters

Remember that your players probably don't know how things work in the Star Wars universe, and you might not either! This does

not mean you have to read every piece of technical information you can get your hands on (although that never hurts), but that you should have a picture in your mind of just how difficult you want the obstacles to be. When the players begin to falter or prove to be in over their heads, allow them to roll against their characters' appropriate skills. High rolls should allow them to acquire bonuses for future actions or you should give them an extra hint about the true obstacles. This does not mean that you tell the players everything you know, but you should do your best to help build the "reality" of the universe they play in.



Haathi didn't tell Maglenna, but she was just as worried about the mission. It wasn't that she was afraid she couldn't come up with a plan; she still didn't have one, but she was fully confident that one would show up very soon. Things rarely went smoothly if she planned too much, because the only thing you could rely on in Special Ops was that you couldn't rely on things going according to plan. But Maglenna would just have to see that for herself.

They'd already gotten past the buzzing, three-story fence using the sergeant's ident badge; now they needed to get past the guard at the front gate, and that was going to take some work.

Haathi turned around to face Maglenna. "I want to congratulate you," she said above the rumble of the engines, "on the role you're about to fill in your first mission."

Maglenna leaned forward to hear. "But I don't know what it is!" she called.

Haathi just gave a knowing smile and turned back around. They were driving along a ready-made path that fully skirted the minefield and the sheer hill, and appeared that it would lead them straight to the guardhouse on the minimum-security side of the depot.

No, the real worry was not the mission. The real worry was Haathi's teammates. Maglenna, for one, seemed to have an increasingly difficult time remembering why she had become member of this team in the first place, but Haathi considered herself very good at picking out the talented oddballs of the Alliance. Although few people would realize it, Maglenna was probably the oddest of them all; she was as well-manicured as a surgeon, but she had insisted on

Laertos

Type: Terrestrial

Temperature: Temperate

Atmosphere: Type I (breathable)

Hydrosphere: Moderate

Gravity: Standard

Terrain: Forests, mountains, plains, oceans, tundra

Length of Day: 28 standard hours

Length of Year: 328 standard days

Sapient Species: Humans, various aliens

Starport: Standard class

Population: 323 million

Planet Function: Resorts, tourism, light manufacturing, trade distribution center

Government: Elected planetary government with Imperial consul-general

Tech Level: Space

Major Exports: Mid technology, food products, low technology luxury goods

Major Imports: High technology, processed materials, manufactured goods

Capsule: Discovered and settled during the last great expansion period of the Old Republic, Laertos has changed very little. The residents and millions of tourists each year enjoy the great expanses of untamed wilderness the planet has to offer. Resorts, vacation homes, and hunting lodges generate the primary income for the planet, although a growing manufacturing industry has begun to sprout. Until recently the Empire has virtually ignored the Laertos system, maintaining only a small consulate center and a supply depot, but as Imperial operations continue to expand in the sector, they have begun to upgrade the supply depot into a full supply garrison.

going through basic military training when she had first joined the Rebellion. She seemed to thrive on rules, yet nobody could quite pigeonhole her into any known position. She was a diplomat from Alderaan, yet having lost her whole planet to the Empire gave her an edge far beyond that of your average bitter young recruit. Beyond all this, however, Haathi didn't really know what Maglenna was capable of, as an operative, and although Maglenna was asking all the right questions, it remained to be seen how well she performed under fire.

She did know what Jayme and Morgan were capable of, but she was concerned about them, too. Really concerned.

She looked over at Jayme, whose thick forearms were sticking uncomfortably out of his Imperial-issue sleeves and whose Imperial cap was perched at the back of his shaved head. He glanced in her direction. "Yeah, you look real Imperial," she said, giving him an exaggerated thumbs-up.

He gave her an amused snort. "As opposed to you."

"I'm working on that." She dipped a finger into the canister of Jayme's green camouflage field paint, and started smearing it all over her blue face. "I'll tell them I was hunting or something."

Jayme gave a quick smile. "That'll convince them."

"Listen," she said. "I've, uh...been meaning to ask...are you okay?"

"Great. Why?"

As if he had to ask. Three weeks earlier he and Morgan had both almost gotten killed by a rogue assassin droid. Jayme had fallen two stories down an turbolift shaft under construction; Morgan had gotten electrocuted when the droid threw her into the main power grid of a YT-1300. Haathi's YT-1300. And Maglenna had almost been a victim, too, although at the time she wasn't a member of Haathi's team. Everyone had spent a week aboard a medical frigate and Haathi passed most of that time waiting to hear whether Jayme had suffered any cranial damage when he fell, or whether Morgan had gone back into cardiac arrest, or whether Maglenna had any sudden growths in her lungs from breathing too much toxic smoke. Haathi herself had breathed enough of it that they'd stuck her on a ventilator for six hours.

So Maglenna could worry all she wanted about the mission. That was irrelevant. Haathi just knew that there would come some other day when somebody would get hurt on her watch, and she wouldn't be there to stop it from happening.

Haathi turned around to face the back seat. Morgan's attention was focused on a datapad. She was wearing a private's uniform with the cap on backwards.

"Morg, could you at least try to look Imperial?"

"Oh, come on, T'Charek," Morgan said without looking up.

"Dress is not casual. At least put your hair up."

"Okay, okay, just a second." Morgan held up a small, blaster-shaped holocam with her free hand. "Now look at me like I just spilled fizzyglug on the main console in *The Maker*."

Haathi gave her a horrible glare, and the camera buzzed.

"Perfect." Morgan looked up. "You can stop glowering now."

"I'm still recovering from that terrifying image you just put in my head," Haathi told her.

"Relax. I got most of it out."

Haathi felt her heart seize. "What?"

"I'm kidding. Okay, Maglenna, look nasty—"

"Morgan, so help me, if I find a drop of fizzyglug anywhere

remotely close to my cockpit—"

"Quiet down, all," Jayme said. Haathi turned back around; the front gate was about thirty meters ahead. It was your average military base entrance: a guy in a uniform sitting in a tiny duracrete office, saluting incoming and outgoing vehicles all day.

"Morg, you got those badges ready?" Jayme asked.

"Look at me as if I'm Colonel Stijhl," she said. He glanced over his shoulder; the camera buzzed. "Good," Morgan said. "I just need about thirty seconds."

"Make it two," Haathi said. Morgan handed her a plastic ident badge. It had the serial number of the sergeant, whose uniform Haathi was wearing; it also had Haathi's picture on it, with a light-flesh-colored face in place of a bluish, paint-smeared one.

Jayme looked at his. "These are very nice pictures, Morgan."

"Thank you." Morgan pointed the camera at herself, turned her cap back around, stuffed her long brown hair up under it, and looked menacing until the shot was taken. "Would you like a copy of yours for your mom, Jayme?"

"No. She gets mad at me when I don't smile for the camera."

"You might also have trouble explaining why you defected back," Haathi said.

They pulled up next to the guard's office. He leaned out the window and looked them over. Jayme flashed his ident badge, and the others straightened up in their seats.

"Patrol 1138, proceed," the guard said, offering a bored salute.

They were in. Until the real patrol was discovered, they could roam around this portion of the base all they wanted. To the left of the gate was a dull gray sign, sprouting out of a clump of scrub grass, that said, "Welcome to Zonith Field" in electric orange letters, and in black letters, "Future home of Laertos Supply and Support Garrison. Please excuse our mess—we are busy building a better tomorrow!" All around were nice residential buildings, trees bedded in duracrete islands, official buildings flanked by mounds of soft dirt marking lawns-to-be.

"Isn't this nice," Haathi said. "I feel at home already." She pulled a flat metal box out of the bag at her feet.

Maglenna leaned forward. "What's that?"

"My treasure box," Haathi told her. She showed Maglenna what was inside: dozens of red, blue, and yellow Imperial rank insignia bars.

"Okay, let's see now," Haathi said, rummaging around. "What

would you like to be?" She pulled out a square-shaped gray insignia piece with a row of four red bars atop a row of four blue bars. "I fancy you a major, Major—" She looked at Maglenna's ident badge—"Eckhord."

Maglenna absently took it, and replaced her lieutenant bars with it. "You wouldn't rather be in charge?" she asked Haathi.

"Maybe later on I'll be a colonel, if it suits me. For now I need you to look like you're the one in charge."

"How do I—"

"Relax. I'll still be ordering you around."

"Where to, T'Charek?" Jayme asked.

"The admin building. Very light security."

"Yeah? What's going on?"

Haathi addressed Maglenna. "You wanted some training? Here's some training. Rule One: Stupid plans are only stupid if they don't work."

"You have a plan?" Maglenna asked.

"Would you believe I do?"



Laertos Imperial Supply Depot

Until recently, the Imperial supply depot on Laertos has been little more than a layover for passing convoys. Situated on a small plateau surrounded by lush wooded hills, the depot was considered an ideal spot to be stationed for Imperials who had no desire to see action. The facility itself consisted of 87 buildings of various sizes and functions spread over a 10-acre park-like compound. The landing field consisted of 40 all-weather landing pads and a single transport tube connecting the landing facility to the main warehouse complex, although fewer than half of them were in use at any given time.

However, as Imperial operations have begun to increase in the sector, so has the need for a larger, more secure supply operation. Three months ago the depot was designated a full supply and support garrison, and construction has been nonstop ever since. The landing field was expanded to 200 landing pads, while the forested hills were flattened and plowed under to establish a

proper security zone and is dotted with numerous security towers. The entire area is heavily patrolled to deter infiltrators, while heavy gun emplacements, land mines and a 10-meter death fence would make direct assault extremely costly.

Construction is nearly finished on the landing field and along the north, east and south security zones. The west side of the compound is yet to be completed, and much of its 10 acres are slated for larger warehouses, administration complexes, barracks, and housing units for the 12,000 civilian employees and military personnel slated to run the facility. Once completed the garrison will be placed under the command of the planet's Imperial consulate-general, while security will be maintained by General Yarra Tenko and his stormtroopers.



The admin building was a T-shaped, beige-colored building with slits instead of windows and large, wide stairs heralding the entrance. Maglenna adjusted her major's insignia and wondered if she would have been working at the Alliance equivalent of this place if she hadn't gotten taken into Special Ops. At this point it was hard to tell which was worse.

Jayme parked the repulsor and everyone piled out, and at Haathi's order, Maglenna led them all up the steps. They walked straight inside, across the black-floored lobby which didn't have any furniture yet, and flashed their badges at the front desk which didn't really have a desktop yet. The clerk gave Haathi a strange look, but let them proceed past him to a bank of freight turbolifts.

"Maglenna, you know admin. Where's the main computer filing system going to be?" Haathi asked.

"Sub-level," Maglenna said. "And," she said, feeling knowledgeable for the first time all day, "they're going to be a lot more careful about security down there."

"Good to know," Haathi said thoughtfully.

The turbolift spit them out in a large, warehouse-looking area. There were chunks of floor missing and a fine duracrete mist in the

"Hey!" the pudgy guard yelled. "You grunts leave that stuff alone!"

air, and the sound of power-hammering somewhere in the distance. Along the walls and scattered all across the floor were pieces of office furniture, and at the far wall was a sealed blast door flanked by two guards who hadn't noticed anybody come into the basement just yet.

Suddenly Maglenna thought of something. Her mind hadn't really registered what it was, but she had a feeling it might be better that way, and she ducked behind a stray console unit, heart pounding. "Distract them," she said, hunching herself over and half-walking, half-crawling to the far end of the console, toward the guards.

Behind her, the others started crashing furniture around. Maglenna darted behind a stack of flimsy chairs, and then a large desk. She peered around the side. Both guards were about 10 meters away from her now, one pudgy and one tall, each with a look of pure exasperation on his face.

"Hey!" the pudgy guard yelled. "You grunts leave that stuff alone!"

They ventured a few steps away from the blast doors, which had "Computer Operations—Sublevel One" painted on them.

"But we're just moving it out of here," Morgan said.

"Get lost, private! I mean it! This is a restricted area!"

Morgan went off on a detailed explanation about orders. She was almost inaudible over the sound of Jayme and Haathi yanking the bottom furniture piece out of every stack, but Maglenna recognized the drone of Morgan's voice in the throes of technobabble. Interesting tranquilization tactic, Maglenna thought.

The guards went further away from the door, shouting over Morgan's lecture. Maglenna took a quick step in front of the blast doors. She thought about how Jayme held himself when he got himself planted in somebody's way, and how Haathi had looked at her earlier, and then she cleared her throat.

"Gentlemen," she said quietly, arms folded across her chest.

Both of them turned around and then instantly stepped backward.

"I asked Ordnance to send some people over to move things in there," Maglenna said, pointing at the doors. "I take it you'd prefer to move it yourself?"

"We weren't informed," the tall one said.

"Oh, I'm sorry, was I supposed to clear insignificant tasks with you?"

"Nuh—no, Major," the fat one said.

"If I have to spend one more day sitting on the floor looking at these—" She waved her arm. "Hideously underdecorated walls, I may have myself an aneurysm, and we don't want that."

The guards seemed to consider that for a second, but they said, "No, ma'am."

"Because then I might have to throw something! Like this chair!" She kicked the nearest desk chair, which had wheels and shot clear across the room. It smashed into a tall stack of smaller chairs, which fell to the ground with a loud, teeth-jarring clatter. Maglenna cringed; she hadn't meant to do that.

The guards, however, blanched, and ran back to the door.

Haathi and the others—all carrying some piece of furniture—waved their ident badges, which the tall guard barely acknowledged as he and the other guard went for the door control button at the same time, each pounding the other's hand.

Maglenna ushered the team inside. "Don't let it happen again!"



she shouted over her shoulder, and marched inside herself.

When the doors shut behind her, she felt something entirely new; a mad rush of adrenaline.

"You're a little too good at this Imperial thing, Major," Jayme said, placing a congratulatory arm around her shoulder.

"It's the boots," she told him.

They were standing in a brightly-lit corridor with transparisteel walls. There was another door in front of them, and through the walls they could see that this led to the main computer room: a huge, dimly-lit area with catwalks and computer terminals around the edges, a high ceiling, and red-lighted control panels dueling with blue-screened monitors to be the only light source in the room. Scores of Imperial techs wove around each other with datapads or hunched over their terminals, an army of pale underground creatures who never saw daylight.

Haathi found a nearby closet full of cleaning supplies, where she tossed the painting she was carrying. "Who wants to hear my plan?" she asked.

Morgan raised her hand.

"That was a rhetorical question, Morg."

"I knew that."

"Wanna know how we're going to breach the maximum-security death sector of the garrison?"

Everyone looked at her expectantly.

"We're not," she said.

"What?" Jayme said.

"But we're gonna make them think we did."



Impersonation

Not every Special Ops member is a born actor. However, with a little practice and a few pointers, he or she should be able to conjure up a decent performance. Good impersonations are not just a matter of looking the part—the imposter must adopt the proper attitude and mannerisms.

Acquiring the proper look is fairly easy, once the appropriate costumes are found. Pay attention to detail, and when possible

have a fellow teammate give your outfit the once-over. Remove or hide any improper equipment. Adjust collars and sleeves to simulate a proper fit. And always double-check rank and unit insignia before arriving at a checkpoint.

Mannerism and attitude are a different story altogether: apply the wrong ones and kiss your act goodbye. Try hard to inspire the same reactions from others that the real position and rank you are posing as would. Imperial officers of the New Order have an air of arrogance about them that they wear like a badge of office. Senior officers will expect automatic obedience from their juniors and will not tolerate hesitation and insubordination; junior officers will try to imitate this attitude around enlisted personnel. Enlisted men will usually do their best to obey the commands and orders of their superiors in a quick and efficient manner. They will not shy away from their assigned tasks, but are usually not inclined to volunteer their services either.

Gizmos, Gadgets and Gear

Although it is the determination and talent of the Special Ops teams that give them the drive to carry out dangerous missions, the timely use of the equipment and weapons they carry often provides the means to succeed. Disaster would have befallen the Rebellion in a garbage masher aboard the Death Star if not for the timely use of a simple comlink, and a lightsaber has been proven to be a pretty handy gadget to have around. However, selecting gear is perhaps the hardest part of the pre-mission experience, as a choice must be made between the potential benefit of an item compared to the practicality of taking it along.

Besides standardized equipment, everything from jury-rigged tools to custom-crafted weapons should be considered. With this in mind, the next question is where the gear will come from. Equipment that is absolutely necessary will probably be provided by the mission planners, or should be requested during the mission briefing. Team members should also take some time to scrounge up items of interest (use skill rolls and Character Points to improve existing items or to create brand-new pieces of gear). It will pay off in the long run if one member becomes the team's official scrounger, obtaining items by charm, trading, and of course, cheating.

Another way to obtain specialized gear is via smugglers and black market operatives. During and between missions, efforts should be made to cultivate contacts with weapon and equipment

suppliers—and it never hurts to have a black market expert on tap. Spend the credits to get customized items. Try to find gear with multiple purposes; since space is limited, the smaller the item the better. And above all else, avoid unnecessary duplication!

In addition, everyone should have his own personalized gear bag and harness rig to carry the various weapons, gadgets and gizmos that they have selected for the mission. Holsters and pouches should be customized for each item, allowing for quick access and easy concealment. Delicate electronics, specialized instruments, and high explosives will need special cases to keep them safe from shock and damage, or to disguise them from prying eyes.

Lastly, all equipment carried by Special Ops teams should be considered expendable. Members should never become so attached to a gizmo that they aren't willing to abandon or sacrifice it for the good of the mission.

Code Key Cylinder Slicer / ID Maker

Model: HackCom 3000

Type: Outlaw cylinder slicer device

Skill: Forgery: cylinder slicer

Cost: (black market only) 12,000 credits, cipher program updates 3,000 credits

Availability: 4, X (Warning: possession of this device carries a mandatory 30-year sentence in an Imperial correction facility)

Game Notes: The HackCom 3000 is a small hand-held micro-computer used to copy and alter most civilian and military code key cylinders and ident badges. The unit uses extremely sophisticated (and highly illegal) cipher programs to break and then mimic the security protocols embedded in modern electronic identity devices. The unit features a detachable holocam, data jacks, and a standard scomp-link for multi-source input. The compact design also has two universal cylinder sockets and a key card slot which accepts all standard sizes of ident cards and badges.

The system is very user-friendly, and even a novice can crank out altered idents on the first try. To copy key cylinders, place the original cylinder and a blank cylinder in the universal sockets then follow the on-screen menus, adding or manipulating the data necessary when prompted. Ident cards and badges are created in the same manner, except that the original card is placed in the slot and then swapped as needed with the blank card. Blank cards and cylinders are not provided with the unit, and they should match the original for maximum results. Remember to constantly upgrade the unit's cipher programs to keep pace with the Empire's security programmers.

A forgery roll is required on each attempt to create a false ident. Failure can range (at the gamemaster's choice) from a useless blank to a flaw that will trip up the user at a later date. A roll of a 1 on the wild die could result in the accidental destruction of the original piece of identification. Difficulty levels are based on the following:

- **Easy:** Creating unaltered copies (key cards, back stage passes, etc.).
- **Moderate:** Minor data alterations of name, picture, and personal information.

• **Difficult:** Major data alterations; the above plus retina patterns, fingerprints, voice sample, etc.

Modifiers:

+10 to forger's roll: Forger is using blank IDs exactly matching the model to be copied.

+5 to forger's roll: Forger has had extensive experience with the type of ID to be copied.

+5 to difficulty level: Forger has no experience with the type of ID to be copied.

+10 or more to difficulty level: Forger is using questionable materials or blanks not identical to the originals.

+30 to difficulty level: Forger is using cipher programs more than 4 months old.

High-Velocity Tranquilizer "Blaster" Pistol

Model: Telex/Delcor Tranq 25 HV Pistol

Type: Tranquilizer "Blaster"

Scale: Character

Skill: **Blaster:** blaster pistol

Ammo: 25 (ammo packs: 75 credits)

Cost: 450 credits

Availability: 1, F

Fire Rate: 1

Range: 3-10/20/30

Damage: 6D stun damage (medical attention is needed to wake a target before the stun wears off naturally)

Game Notes: Tranquilizer "blasters" are not technically blasters or energy weapons and therefore targets receive applicable armor bonuses for physical attacks. In addition, they can only penetrate clothing, animal hides and light personal armor and are ineffective against doors, buildings, vehicles and other dense materials. Each point of damage causes 10 minutes of unconsciousness; only a medical stimulant can awaken a target before the stun wears off naturally.

Capsule: Used primarily by animal control specialists, these weapons are designed for the quick takedown of large animals, but work equally well against human and aliens. Each pull of the trigger releases thousands of microscopic gel-balls along a focused repulsor beam at super high velocity. Capable of penetrating skin, hides and light armor, the gels-balls (concentrated neuro-relaxers) cause a harsh stinging sensation on impact and take effect almost instantly. Although technically a projectile weapon, this model of tranquilizer gun uses the casing and firing controls of a discontinued line of sporting blasters, and are fired as easily as a normal blaster. Heavily silenced, and lacking the violent combustion of blaster gases, these weapons have the added benefit of being virtually noiseless.

Captain Jayme's Tranq 25 HV Carbine

Model: Modified Telex/Delcor Tranq 25 HV Pistol

Type: Tranquilizer "Blaster" carbine

Scale: Character

Skill: Blaster: blaster carbine

Ammo: 25 (ammo packs: 75)

Cost: not available for sale

Availability: custom crafted, not rated

Fire Rate: 1

Range: 3-25/50/150

Damage: 6D stun damage (medical attention is needed to wake up a target before the stun wears off naturally)

Game Notes: Tranquilizer "blasters" are not technically blasters or energy weapons and therefore targets receive applicable armor bonuses for physical attacks. In addition, they can only penetrate clothing, animal hides and light personal armor and are ineffective against doors, buildings, vehicles and other dense materials. Each point of damage causes 10 minutes of unconsciousness; only a medical stimulant can awaken a target before the stun wears off naturally. Captain Jayme is currently field testing Lieutenant Raventhorn's latest invention. It features a fully integrated targeting computer/scope with holo-imaging, light amplifiers, image shifters, and heat signature sensors. Stability and effective range were increased by the attachment of a booster muzzle/hand grip which also features recessed scope controls for range, zoom, focus and sensor selections.

Remote Detonator Glove

Model: Modified BothiCorp Labor Droid Remote Glove

Type: Outlaw tech remote demolition controller

Skill: Demolitions: detonator glove

Cost: 300 credits (glove), 200 credits (c-chips and parts)

Availability: X

Game Notes: The BothiCorp glove was originally designed for use as a portable control device for cargo handlers using dozens of B1 labor droids simultaneously. Commands are easily entered via input buttons built into the palm and wristband, which are uploaded to the droids via built-in comlink. A Moderate computer repair roll is needed to replace and modify the glove's command chips and programming. Each explosive device linked to the glove must have a remote-controlled detonator attached, and an Easy demolition roll is required to properly synchronize each device to the glove's comlink. Once modified, the glove can control up to 200 individual explosive devices with a range of 300 meters. Since being created by a very bored Lieutenant Raventhorn, the remote detonator glove has almost become a standard piece of gear in the Special Ops community.



Captain Mylesgood of the Imperial Security Bureau was slouched in his office chair, looking out the massive transparisteel window that took up the entire far wall, when he heard the door slide open behind him. He barely acknowledged the sound, because his attention was on the scene in front of him. Everything outside was in chaos. The old admin building had been torn down and replaced by some ugly duracrete thing with no windows; the old landing

strip was being replaced by a massive network of landing pads, and his view, his beautiful view of the woods and the mountains, was being replaced by a view of the four-story duracrete wall that divided his side of the base from the new, sleek, maximum security side, where short little black buildings nestled around the base of one tall security tower. Mylesgood couldn't see the chief of security's office from where he was sitting, but he knew the window over there was twice as big as his.

"Captain? Sir?" A woman's voice. Sergeant Chambers, his aide. "Am I interrupting you?"

"He's watching me, Chambers," Mylesgood said.

"Who?"

Mylesgood pointed out the window. "Tenko. You know, the general."

"He's watching you, sir?"

"He's watching me out of that big, huge office right now. He's thinking about all the little white stormtroopers who are going to come down and fill his security tower and send people like you and me out to little nothing planets with little nothing assignments."



Mylesgood turned around; Chambers was rocking expectantly back and forth on the balls of her feet. "We made this base, Chambers! We owned this planet without the planet even knowing! Now Vader and Palpatine have to advertise to the whole bloody galaxy where the Empire is."

"It's a new universe, sir," Chambers said.

"That's what they said when I enlisted. Except in a different tone of voice."

"Sir, there's something I need to speak to you about."

"Can't it wait?"

"Until you're finished brooding, sir? No."

Mylesgood sighed. "I'm going to miss you, Chambers."

"Thank you, sir. Listen, we have a problem."

"Which is what?"

"Patrol 1138 never reported in."

For the first time Mylesgood looked directly into Chambers' eyes, which were unusually perplexed. "A whole patrol disappeared?" he asked.

"No, they came in through the front gate about a half hour ago. They just never reported in."

Mylesgood drummed all of his fingers on the desk.

"It may just be some drunken incident again," Chambers said.

"Do you want me to issue a general alert?"

Mylesgood turned around in his chair, looked at the tall security tower again, and turned back around. "No, Chambers. We'll handle this entirely ourselves."

"Okay, sir, if you say so."

"Don't you want to know why?"

"I figured you'd tell me."

"Because if this is just a drunken incident, I don't want General Discontent over there using it as an excuse to remind everyone what a bunch of backwater hicks used to run this place."

"And if it's not?"

"Then it's terrorists. And in that event, I'm going to see that you and I and the rest of the agents get so many commendations, we'll build another Death Star out of them and make Vader serve us brunch on Coruscant."

"Sir?"

"In other words, I'm going to find these people and I'm going to make them wish they were dealing with an entire battalion of

stormtroopers." He stood up. "Send my repulsor around. Inform the troops to set their rifles to kill, but make sure they save one or two perpetrators for me to—how shall we say—interview."

"Very good, sir," Chambers said, and the two of them left the office in a hurry.



Captain Edmond Mylesgood

Type: Imperial Security Bureau Agent

DEXTERITY 3D

Blaster 6D, brawling parry 4D, dodge 5D, melee combat 5D, melee parry 4D, vehicle blasters 5D

KNOWLEDGE 4D

Alien species 4D+2, bureaucracy 6D, business 5D, cultures 4D+2, intimidation 6D, law enforcement 5D+2, streetwise 5D, value 4D+2, willpower 5D+2

MECHANICAL 2D+1

Communications 3D+2, repulsorlift operation 3D, sensors 4D, spacetransports 3D+1, walker operations 6D

PERCEPTION 3D

Bargain 4D+2, command 6D, con 5D+1, gambling 5D, hide 4D+1, investigation 5D, persuasion 4D+2, search 3D+2, sneak 4D

STRENGTH 2D+2

Brawling 4D+2, climbing/jumping 3D+2, stamina 4D, swimming 3D

TECHNICAL 3D

Computer programming/repair 5D, droid programming 4D+2, security 6D

Character Points: 14

Force Points: 1

Move: 10

Equipment: comlink, expensive chrono, heavy blaster pistol (5D damage), hold out blaster (3D+2 damage), ISB uniform, datapad, stun baton (4D stun damage), code key cylinder



Capsule: Edmond Mylesgood was born to wealthy nobility on a prominent Core world, and looked forward to a life of lazy indulgence. Unfortunately, his parents' wealth could not prevent his conscription into the Imperial Military. After several years of distinguished service (and numerous close calls) in the Army Walker Corps, he decided to pursue another—less deadly—career path. He meticulously studied every ounce of COMPNOR rhetoric he could find and applied for a transfer. To his surprise he was accepted by the Imperial Security Bureau (ISB).

During the time when the ISB actually provided security for the Emperor's pet projects, Mylesgood raced through the ranks. By balancing competence with animosity he managed to keep himself from getting posted to any truly dangerous assignments. His carefully-plotted campaign paid off, and he was soon assigned as head of security to the supply depot on Laertos, a true paradise for those who wish to never see battle or excitement. Soon, he was enjoying the good life once again, hitting the slopes and partying with the local elite.

After five years the Emperor's grand schemes finally caught up with him. He was to become one of the thousands of security officers aboard the Death Star. Fortunately for Mylesgood, the battle station was destroyed before his transfer took effect and he was allowed to remain at Laertos for another two years. Unfortunately, the Civil War has greatly expanded in scope and again the Empire has come along to wreck his life. As his security posting is being handled over to General Tenko, Captain Mylesgood can only wonder where his next assignment will take him.

ISB Trooper

Type: Imperial Security Bureau Trooper

DEXTERITY 2D

Blaster 4D, brawling parry 4D, dodge 3D, melee combat 3D+2, melee parry 4D, vehicle blasters 4D

KNOWLEDGE 2D

Alien species 4D+2, bureaucracy 3D, streetwise 3D

MECHANICAL 2D

Repulsorlift operation 3D

PERCEPTION 2D

Bargain 3D+2, command 3D+2, con 3D+1, search 3D+1, sneak 3D

STRENGTH 2D

Brawling 3D

TECHNICAL 2D

Security 3D

Move: 10

Equipment: Body armor and helmet (+1D energy, +1D physical), comlink, blaster rifle (5D damage) or heavy blaster pistol (5D damage), stun baton (4D stun damage), code key cylinder

Imperial LD5 Patrol Speeder

Craft: Ubrikkian LD5 Land Speeder

Type: Light duty land speeder

Scale: Speeder
Length: 5 meters
Skill: Repulsorlift operations: landspeeder
Crew: 1 driver, 1 gunner
Crew Skill: repulsorlift operations: landspeeder 4D; vehicle blasters 3D+2
Passengers: 4
Cargo Capacity: 500 kilograms
Cover: 1/2
Altitude Range: 0–5 meters
Cost: 22,000 (new), 12,000 (used)
Maneuverability: 3D+2
Move: 195, 560 kmh
Body Strength: 2D
Weapons: Twin Blaster Cannon (rear-mounted deck gun)
Fire Arc: Turret
Crew: 1 (gunner)
Skill: Vehicle blasters
Fire Control: 1D
Range: 50–200/1/2 km
Damage: 4D

Capsule: The LD5 is a small, tough landspeeder perfectly suited to patrol duty, with seating for six. The craft can carry a moderate-sized patrol team swiftly about their rounds and the rear-mounted deck gun packs enough punch to detain all but the best-armed intruders.



Morgan was leaning one-handed against the four-story duracrete wall that divided their zone from the maximum security zone. Running across the top of the wall were two thick, highly-charged cables, obviously because it was smarter to go over the wall than through it. Typical Imperial delusion.

She looked down at Jayme, kneeling next to her. They were in almost complete darkness, with the odd searchlight occasionally playing across the wall about a meter above them. "What's the blast zone gonna be?" he asked, pulling a couple of palm-sized, square-shaped charges from his bag.

"I knew that was a rhetorical question," she said.

"What?"

"Back in the file room. I knew T'Charek was being rhetorical."

"Okay, good, Morg, but tell me what you think about—"

"See, I know you people think I'm clueless, but I'm not."

Jayme affixed a charge to the wall, about a foot off the ground. "I need a calculation, Morg."

"Of what?"

"Gimme blast radius and minimum safe distance from here."

"Approximately?"

"Yeah. Just a rough guess."

Morgan shut her eyes. An equation flashed in front of her, but she didn't consciously acknowledge what it was. She opened her eyes and looked out at the compound, which bustled a little less now that it was nearly dark. "Fifty-one point three seven four meters," she said.

"Why point three seven four?"

"The wind, Jayme, the wind!"

"Oh. Right."

Morgan could never understand how she had gained a reputation for being spacey when what she really did was pay closer attention to detail than anyone else. Jayme could have made that calculation, she thought, if he had wanted to apply himself. His problem, and everyone else's, was that they didn't know that sitting down and calculating until you were numb was a complete waste of time. You just had to let the answers come to you.

"Okay," Jayme said, handing her three charges. "Stick these just over your head, and then let's get out of here."

Morgan put the handle-end of a glow rod in her teeth and placed the charges in a horizontal row, like the top of a doorframe. Then she pulled her detonator glove out of her jacket, slid it onto her left hand, turned around, and strolled across the compound with Jayme. They both avoided the streetlights, which had kicked on about a minute earlier.

**"Hands up now,
nice and slow!
Get down on the
ground!" the
sergeant yelled.**

"Does T'Charek seem a little edgy to you lately?" Morgan asked.

"She almost lost her whole team," Jayme said. "It's going to haunt her for a while."

"Yeah, but it wasn't her fault."

"That doesn't matter to her. Besides, anything like that makes you assess your mortality and everyone else's. Don't you feel different?"

"Nah. It started out like any other day for me—get up, brush my hair, fix the main computer grid, get electrocuted by a rogue assassin droid who thinks I'm a Hutt."

Jayme smiled. Morgan liked it when he did, because it was a relatively rare event, and she and T'Charek and Maglenna were the

only people he'd smile at. Except for the odd Imperial whom he had dead to rights.

Of course he always got incredibly serious immediately after smiling, as if he had to do penance or something for acknowledging happiness. He jerked his comlink out of his belt and spoke in a gruff voice. "Major," he said. "We're coming home."

He barely finished the sentence. The comlink was shrieking with the sound of blaster fire.

"Negative!" Haathi shouted. "I need you to—"

The channel went dead.

"Oh, great! Come on," Jayme said, breaking into a run. He and Morgan went around the corner of the post exchange, where their repulsor was waiting. And so was a squadron of men in black and gray suits with shiny black helmets, all engaged in searching the repulsor.

Morgan's stomach dipped.

"Halt!"

In one smooth maneuver, all of them trained their blaster rifles at Jayme and Morgan. "Hands up, nice and slow! Get down on the ground!" the sergeant yelled.

They raised their hands. Morgan looked at Jayme, who was staring expectantly at her.

"What?" she asked.

His eyes widened.

The sergeant shouted, "Get down! Now! Do it!"

"Ohhh, that," Morgan said. Her gloved fingers went down into her palm, first the index finger, then the ring, then the middle, twice.

There was a loud popping noise 10 meters away, as the temporary generator shed, which controlled the protective wiring on top of the wall, blew into bits. Morgan felt herself flying, and she knew she should have put her hands out and braced herself for the fall, but she kept pressing her fingers into the glove, setting off the trail of charges inside doorways and underneath repulsor trucks and finally on the giant wall itself. Somewhere Jayme was yelling something.

Morgan didn't really know what happened next. She had some vague recollection of the explosions, but she wasn't sure how they had occurred; and she thought she remembered getting up and just running, because Jayme had told her to.

However, when her head cleared, Jayme was nowhere, and she was standing with her back to an alley wall, three troopers pointing rifles in her face.

"You're coming with us, Rebel."





Twenty minutes earlier, Haathi and Maglenna had been in a very tranquil setting. The Imperial clerks acted like a bunch of overprotected, nervous pets, and didn't like to raise their voices to an audible conversational tone. Much less acknowledge the presence of majors and strange-looking sergeants. Which meant that Haathi and Maglenna could stand in the corridor all they wanted as long as they didn't run across any security types.

"How can I look official?" Maglenna whispered.

"Pretend you're at a Senate meeting, and one of Palpatine's little supporters thinks he knows everything, but you know that you own him."

Maglenna immediately assumed a ramrod-straight posture, a charming half-smirk, and a fluid, relaxed manner. Haathi was just fighting off the urge to fetch her a cocktail when a young lieutenant emerged from a group of offices down the corridor and started putting on his gray jacket.

Haathi trotted up to him. "Excuse me—" She almost called him "Son," but caught herself. "—Sir?"

He looked at her; one of his eyes was bloodshot.

"How come you're wearing camouflage paint?" he asked her.

"Recon."

"Oh."

"Sir, we're really sorry to bother you, but we need a quick favor from you."

He sighed heavily, then glanced over Haathi's shoulder and appeared to catch sight of Maglenna.

"Oh, uh, of course, Major," he said, and led them into his office. Haathi noted that all the other offices in the row were dark.

Inside, the room was entirely decorated in a soothing metallic blue, with fresh carpeting on the floor, a brand new control panel covered in construction dust, and a large stack of datapads on a box near the lieutenant's chair. When the door closed, all the outside noises disappeared. Haathi felt as if she were submerged in bath water.

"Okay, what do you need?"

"Um..." Maglenna set her datapad on the stack. "We have an

updated cargo manifest for the...the Savareen...Rodian. The Savareen Rodian. Yes."

"Hmmm yeah, gimme minute," the lieutenant said. He slid his code cylinder into the slot by the main monitor and then mindlessly typed in his personal access code. "Savareen Rodian," he said after a second. "That's a weird name."

"Isn't it?" Haathi said.

"Did I ask for editorial commentary?" Maglenna snapped, sounding almost genuinely hurt.

"Sorry. What kinda ship is it?" He reached for the datapad.

"Doesn't it say on the datapad?" Haathi asked him.

"Yes, you mean you don't know?" Maglenna said.

He looked at the pad, and then back up. "Wait a second! This isn't—" he said into the muzzle of Haathi's heavy blaster.

After she had shoved his unconscious body, still in his chair, into the corner, Haathi holstered her blaster and leaned against the control panel. "All right," she said to Maglenna. "Here's what's happening. Morgan and Jayme are waiting to hear, from me, where the most obvious place for a break-in would be, and in 10 minutes they will blow it up. Now I'm going to stand at Mr. Auxiliary Terminal over here and find out exactly where, on the other side of the dividing wall, the Imperials keep their important supplies. Then I'm going to do an absolutely horrible job of covering my tracks."

"What do I do?"

"You're going to do an absolutely brilliant job of covering my tracks."

"What about the super freighter?"

"No point, now. You get into the system and you put my new plan into motion."

"Which is?"

"Mr. Imperial Lieutenant got you into the shipping file, right?"

"Yes."

"You're going to change a few things."

"What, the schedules?"

"That's what you'd think, isn't it? That's what I'm going to make them think. You, on the other hand, are going to re-route future shipping orders. Say you run across a shipment of heavy artillery bound for some humongous Imperial fortress on, I don't know, Coruscant or someplace big."

"Yes?"

"It would be much easier for the Rebellion if that important

shipment went to little, minimum-security Rodaj—oh, golly, that's just within spitting distance of our base on Vale Four!"

Maglenna continued to look concerned, but her eyes lit up. "And this has all been processed by the Imperials already," she said.

"Yeah. It's all been pre-approved."

Maglenna set to work with an expression of diligence mixed with wonder. In a relatively short amount of time, both of them were able to plow straight through the data files, after conferring briefly about which Rebel bases were located near which Imperial bases. Haathi, for her part, concentrated her efforts on the depot; she located the areas that an inexperienced terrorist would want to sabotage, relayed them to Jayme and Morgan, and then did a deliberately sloppy job of hiding her computerized path.

Finally Haathi checked her chrono. "You about ready?" she



asked Maglenna.

"Almost," Maglenna said. "Do we still have a base on Sheshar—"

"Hey!"

Both of them whipped around, blasters drawn, to see a middle-aged warrant officer standing in the doorway.

He instantly stumbled backwards into the hall. "Security!" he yelled, reaching madly for the wall behind him. Two stun bolts went into his torso, but not before he caught the alert button with his elbow.

"Oh, man." Haathi ran out into the corridor. A hundred techs had practically jumped onto the ceiling. On the other side of the main room, through the far transparisteel wall, there was a bank of three turbolifts, which Haathi considered running for until she noticed the red lights flashing over each one.

"Security lockout!" she said to Maglenna, who was now standing next to her.

"Meaning what?"

"There will be a squad of stormtroopers down here in about two minutes. Rule two: if things are going smoothly, you're walking into an ambush!"

Maglenna was clearly fighting off her body's natural urge to panic, and holding her blaster as if she weren't sure whether she should just holster it and act casual. Her question was answered by the two guards from the main blast door, who came running in, immediately spotted the women, and started firing.



Jayme's shoulder was killing him. He had landed on the steps of the post exchange and come to just in time to see Morgan's body slam into three ISB agents. She got up; they didn't.

If he'd been a little more lucid, Jayme might have been able to help her, but as it was, he just watched in a complete stupor as Morgan staggered a short distance away from the repulsor and then activated the bag of explosives that two agents had found on the floor. Jayme blacked out again, and the next thing he knew, the repulsor was destroyed, the agents were dead, and Morgan was gone.

T'Charek is going to kill me.

What's In The Bag?

Equipment carried by Major T'Charek Haathi

Gear bag: assorted Imperial rank and unit insignia, mini-computer.

Weapons belt: DL-44 heavy blaster with 4 spare blaster packs, comlink, smoke grenade, stun-step remote for *The Maker*.

Additional: vibro-knife (wrist sheath), wrist chrono.

Equipment carried by Captain Ivhin Jayme

Gear bag: 12 detonite charges, synthrope, 4 spare blaster packs.

Weapons belt: 4 spare blaster packs, garrote, comlink, glow rod, 2 spare Tranq 25 ammo clips.

Additional: Tranq 25 HV Carbine (shoulder slung), 2 vibro-knives in boot sheaths, 2 heavy blaster pistols (shoulder holster), wrist chrono.

Equipment carried by Lady Maglenna Pendower

Weapons belt: comlink, data-pad, 4 spare holdout blaster packs.

Additional: stocked Imperial field medkit (shoulder slung), DL-44 heavy blaster (hidden in medkit), holdout blaster (shoulder holster), wrist chrono.

Equipment carried by Lieutenant Morgan Q. Raventhorn

Gear bag: 12 detonite charges, HackCom 3000, BothiCorp Voicebox, micro tool-kit.

Weapons belt: 4 spare blaster packs, comlink, glow rod, remote detonator glove, scomp-spiker.

Additional: 36T blaster-carbine (shoulder slung), hunting knife (boot sheath), wrist chrono.

Without really thinking, Jayme grabbed the railing and pulled himself to his feet. There seemed to be a great deal of confusion around him, but he couldn't hear anything, and for a moment he wondered if his eardrums had been blown out. Then he heard a faraway voice.

"That's the other one!"

Jayme focused; it had come from a man who wasn't far away after all—a captain standing on the back deck of a repulsor that had two ISB agents in the front seat, and another manning a huge deck gun

mounted near the captain. One of the survivors of the last explosion heard the order and ran to the steps. His fists were balled and his holster was empty; evidently he and his blaster had been separated.

Jayne had the same problem. He looked from the incoming agent to the captain's repulsor to the deck gun looming over the captain's head.

"Save him for questioning!" the captain shouted.

That was all Jayme needed to hear. As the agent came up the steps, Jayme kicked him in the chest. Then he grabbed the top edges of the nearest window—which, like all the others in that building, had not yet been graced with transparisteel—and swung inside, legs first.

He put his feet down on an uneven floor that didn't have all of its tiles, and he got away from the window. This was a cavernous place with no desks, no counters, none of the luxuries it would eventually provide. If not for a power generator glowing blue against the far wall, the room would have been completely dark.

Jayne grabbed one of the long generator cables lying across the floor, strung it across the posts on either side of the front door, and waited, his eyes on the windows. About twenty seconds later a dark shape wearing a big black ISB helmet appeared at the window directly across from him; the hum of a repulsor and the captain's barking voice passed by the windows on the other side. Jayme stayed in the shadows and didn't say anything.

Suddenly two agents came barreling through the front door, blaster rifles at chest level. They gave simultaneous choking yelps as they ran throat-first into the generator cable. Jayme kicked away one rifle and took the other, and sprinted out the front door.

He still didn't know exactly where he was, but there was a throng of regular Army troops running around who were just as confused and didn't pay him any attention. He straightened up and melded right into the crowd.

Stupid, stupid, stupid, he thought as he jogged along with a bunch of soldiers who were running away from the scene of the explosion and toward a block of residences. He split off from the group and ran down a side alley. I should have stuck near her, I should have shielded her from the blast somehow....

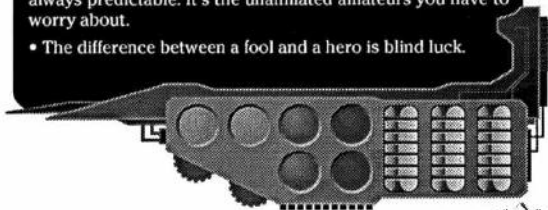
When he turned the corner, he was still thinking about Morgan; that was how two of Mylesgood's agents stepped out of the shadows and easily got him in a choke hold.



Mylesgood's evening was looking up. Down the street, they were securing the male terrorist, and as Mylesgood got closer he could see that Kaser and Spinks were each holding onto one of the man's arms, which they were thrusting behind his back, and Shales was walking around to the man's front.

Haathi's Top Ten Rules

- If your enemy is in range, that's something you have in common.
- Drawing attention to oneself is the same thing as drawing fire.
- When in doubt, empty your blaster pack.
- Be nice to the snotty young lieutenant—he'll be your C.O. in a few years.
- High Command exists for the sole purpose of taking the fun out of everything.
- Never underestimate the power of a cocky, all-knowing smile, especially when you have no idea what you're doing.
- Don't ever be intimidated by sheer number of Imperial forces. Remember, it took thousands of grunt laborers to build the Death Star and only one overconfident superior to lose it.
- When everything is going according to plan, you have walked into an ambush.
- You have nothing to fear from career Imperials; they're always predictable. It's the unaffiliated amateurs you have to worry about.
- The difference between a fool and a hero is blind luck.



Mylesgood entertained thoughts of how to question this man. He knew just how to do it, too, just how to leave this clever fellow a quivering wreck. He pictured himself throwing the terrorist at the general's feet, and he felt a rush of the kind of excitement he hadn't felt since the days when the base was unquestionably his. That hadn't seemed like such a long time ago until right now.

The captain was on foot now, having parked the repulsor a short distance away; about a third of his squadron had been lost in the explosion, something he refused to let himself register until all this was over. The rest, including his driver, had been sent after the female terrorist, after this man at the end of the street, and after the other imposters. Wherever they were.

Shales was standing with his arms on his hips, talking in a steady voice.

"Might as well tell us, little man. If you don't, we'll just squeeze the information out of your lady friend."

The terrorist gave a low grunt, hoisted himself up by the waist, got his ankles around Shales' neck, and twisted.

Something crunched. Shales dropped, his head at a funny angle. Mylesgood heard himself give a high-pitched gasp.

Kaser and Spinks were both standing with their mouths open, and the terrorist head-butted Kaser, got his right arm free, and threw Kaser right into Spinks. Their heads conked together and they both fell to the ground.

Mylesgood was running now, blaster drawn, and he didn't stop until he was right in the man's face.

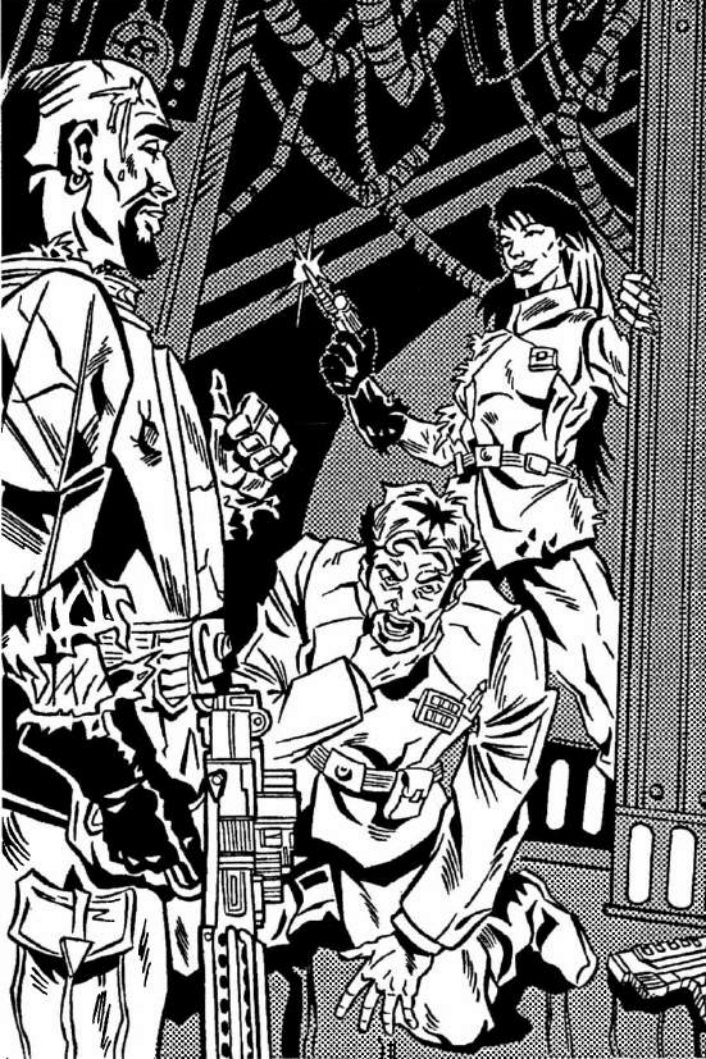
The terrorist froze.

Mylesgood stepped back. "You've been quite a troublemaker," he said.

The terrorist said nothing. His eyes took in Mylesgood, assessing him, assessing the situation.

"I've been a very patient man," Mylesgood said, demonstratively looking at his fallen agents. "But now I don't especially feel like conducting an interrogation. I don't care why you're here anymore. I do care that you're still breathing and an inordinate number of my people are not.

"Furthermore, this is still my base, contrary to popular belief, so I don't care about all the general's Army grunts running around in the streets trying to fix your mess. The general doesn't count and his men don't count. You know who counts now? You and me. You know what else counts? This blaster. Think about that now. One



blaster and two of us."

The terrorist's head was half-bowed, but he kept looking at Mylesgood.

Then he smiled.

Mylesgood had to respect that. He leveled his blaster at the man's head. He would have fired, too, except that he suddenly felt a sharp little sting on his neck.

"Ow!" he said, smacking it.

Suddenly he felt extremely heavy. His legs couldn't hold him up. He couldn't keep the blaster in position, couldn't even hold it anymore, and it clattered to the ground.

"Three of us," the terrorist said.

Mylesgood looked up into the sky, up at the man standing over him. The last thing Mylesgood saw before he blacked out was a young female private in a charred and tattered uniform. She was holding a bizarre-looking pistol, which she pretended she was going to throw at the male terrorist, then handed it to him.

"The sights work just fine now, Mr. Fussy," she said, and they walked away together.



In the computer room, there were twenty army troopers trying to fight their way around a sea of panicky clerks lunging for the back exit, and the tall guard was still firing at Haathi and Maglenna, who were standing in the office doorway.

"Rule forty-seven!" Haathi shouted over the noise. "The enemy only attacks on two occasions! One—you're ready! Two—you're not!"

"All right, already!" Maglenna screamed. "I'm learning! I'm with you! Improvise! No real training! Fine! Just stop quoting rules at me!"

"But they're motivational!" Haathi yelled.

Maglenna sent a flurry of blaster shots into the hall. The tall guard took three blue bolts in the chest and collapsed.

"See?" Haathi said.

Maglenna suddenly felt an urge to collapse in hysterical laughter. Her heart was pounding and so were her ears, but underneath that, all of her senses felt sharp.

"Now come on," Haathi said, running into the corridor. "Join the fray."

"What fray?"

"This one." Haathi jumped into the crowd of Imperials and started firing at the ceiling. Some of them thought to hit the ground, but most tried to scatter away from her, in the direction of their own troops. Maglenna followed Haathi's lead, and the two of them shouted and shot their way to the main loading exit. If anyone got in the way, they stunned him or her, and by the time the security troops had gotten a vantage point Haathi and Maglenna were outside in the main loading area, running.

When they came around to the front of the building, they saw troops of all kinds running everywhere. Nobody noticed the rumpled-looking major or the camouflage-faced sergeant. Everyone was shouting orders, or tramping by with their blasters out, or shouting obscenities at the people on the maximum-security side of the wall.

Haathi turned to face Maglenna. "Are you all right?" she asked. "I was getting worried."

"About what?"

"If the troops thought they could just get one shot off, they would have picked you. When the enemy has to be selective, best to look unimportant."

"Is that rule forty-eight?"

"It's actually sixty-something. I just skipped ahead."

Suddenly Haathi and Maglenna were cut off by a repulsor car with a massive deck gun.

"Hey, Major Headcase and Corporal Punishment," its driver shouted. "Get in!"

"Sergeant, Morgan, I'm a sergeant!" Haathi shouted back, and gleefully jumped onto the back deck of the repulsor. Maglenna, who was standing closer to the front end of the vehicle, noticed that the driver was sporting a black eye and her passenger was clutching his shoulder. Both of them looked like they had emerged from a mattress fire.

"Are you all right?" Maglenna asked.

On hearing her say that, Haathi, standing directly behind Morgan and Jayme's seats, leaned forward and put an arm around each of them. "What happened?" she cried, taking in their faces. "I leave you alone for half an hour?"

"That's the thing, T'Charek. We weren't alone," Morgan said.

"Who were you with? A pyromaniac?"

"It looks like mostly soot and smoke damage, T'Charek," Maglenna said, climbing onto the back deck. To Jayme and Morgan, she said,

"I'm going to spend the rest of my career patching the two of you up, aren't I."

"Is that one of T'Charek's rules?" Morgan asked.

"It is now," Haathi said, and gave a sigh. "All right, just get us out of here, girl-genius. You can tell me how you torched yourselves later."

Morgan and Jayme each gave a stiff Imperial salute. Haathi sat in the deck gunner's chair and fastened herself in; Maglenna stood in the middle of the deck with her arms behind her, looking solemn. She thought that maybe if somebody looked at least halfway official, the guard at the gate wouldn't feel compelled to ask any questions. Not that that mattered—Maglenna guessed that Haathi's next plan was to have Morgan barrel straight on through the minimum-security gate and be far into the woods before anybody had time to respond. As it was, Morgan drove down side streets and gave the right-of-way to oncoming emergency vehicles headed for the wall.

Haathi, situated with her knee right next to Maglenna's head, sat back in her seat, and tapped Maglenna on the shoulder.

"First mission's pretty well over," she said. "How do you feel?"

"Numb," Maglenna said.

"Do you miss your desk job?"

"No, because I learned something today."

"Forty-eight extraneous rules?"

"Forty-nine. Anything you do in a war can get you killed."

"Including doing something boring."

Maglenna looked back; at the T-shaped admin building, the Imperials were still tripping over each other, cramming up the doorway, stumbling into the loading area, hollering and moaning.

"Especially doing something boring," she said. "Fortunately, with you three, that's one less thing for me to worry about."



SHIFTING —GEARS—

By Jean Rabe

Illustrations by Joe Corroney

"Lovely planet they sent us to, El-Tee. Positively rustic. I might even go so far as to call it quaint."

"Quit complaining, Arvee. Vengler's just a little primitive, that's all."

"Primitive? We landed on a plateau, not in a spaceport. No amenities. Not a cantina in sight. Why not call the place what it really is, sir? A dirtball."

The Rebel lieutenant scowled at the toad-like quadruped, his second-in-command, then pointed toward the darkening hills. "A little dirt never hurt anyone. 'Sides, we won't be here long. We cut through that gap and surprise the Imperials on the other side. There's not many. A couple dozen stormtroopers, support staff. Should be able to take them without much of a fight. We've got plenty of room on the shuttle for prisoners."

"Prisoners?"

"Yeah, prisoners. This'll be easy, Arvee. Piece of Mundlop zilg-dicody."

"Easy," Arvee repeated. "Too bad I'm allergic to zilg."

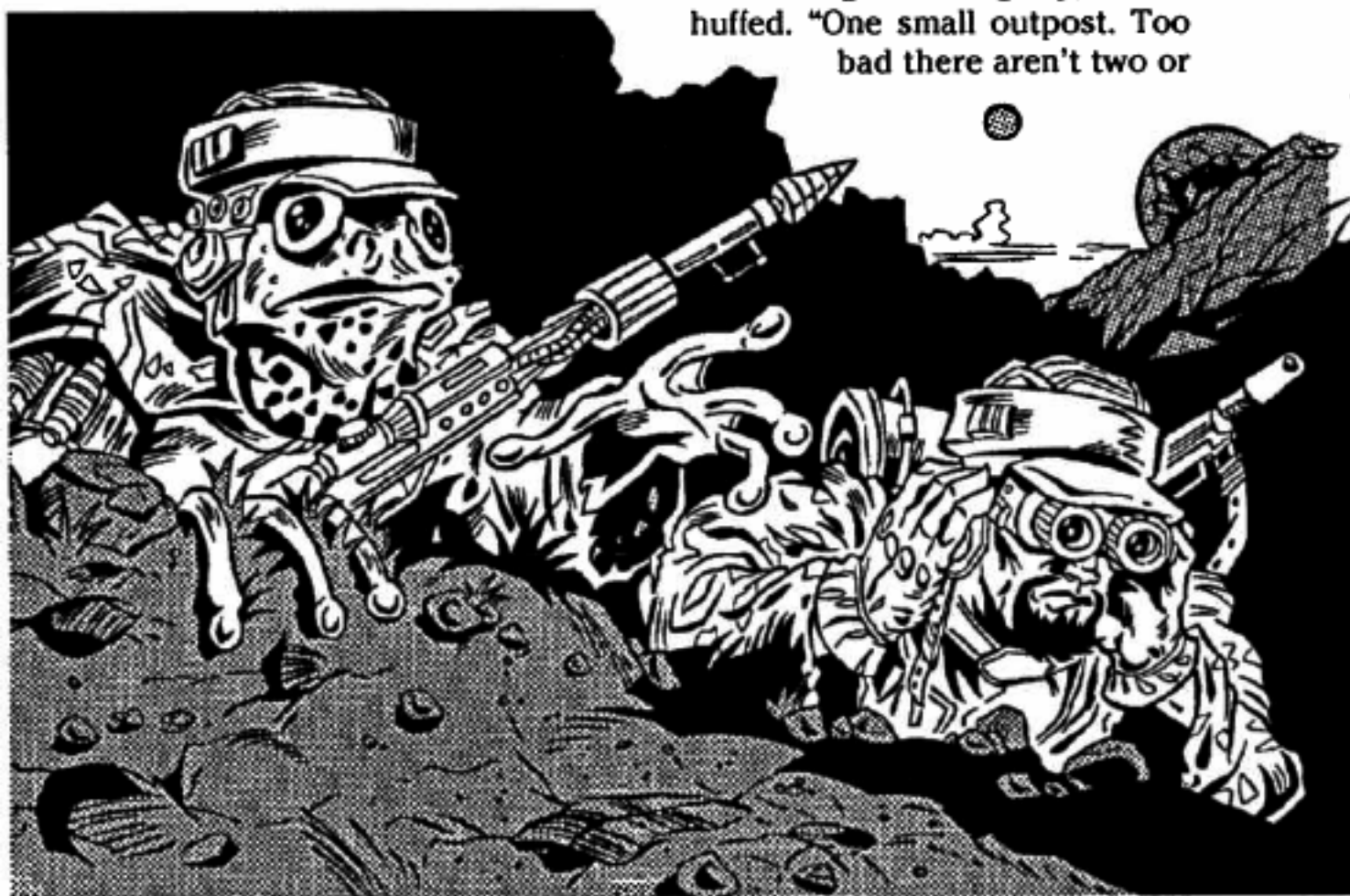
"We free the miners," the lieutenant continued, "then it's leave time for all of us on a big Ithorian herd ship."

The lieutenant had to admit he shared Arvee's view of the

backwater world. Vengler was largely uncivilized, particularly this continent, and being on the fringe made it easy pickings for the small Imperial unit that was reported to have moved in and taken over the quendek mine. If it hadn't been for an Alliance spy planted in the complement of a passing merchant frigate, the Imperial presence on Vengler probably would have gone unnoticed for years. Better to bring in a detachment now and shut it down right away, the lieutenant thought—before the Imperials have a chance to build weapon emplacements and set up a base.

"Easy. Phfhhfftt!" Arvee squatted on his rear legs, scratched at a wart, and reached for the blaster rifle slung over his mottled back. "Right, El-Tee. Easy for you humans." He scrunched his lips into the approximation of a pout and eyed the rest of the Rebel force—nearly all of the 150 were Coreellian recruits. There were a few Devaronians and a couple of Sullustans in the mix, but he was the only one who walked on all fours. "Easy 'cause all this dust doesn't bother you two-leggers much. At least this beats resting in my bunk

and watching the stars go by," Arvee huffed. "One small outpost. Too bad there aren't two or



three. I really like to shoot stormtroopers. I'm good at it, too." Arvee hunkered down, his brown bumpy hide helping him blend in with the rough landscape. A hint of a smile crossed his bulbous lips. "Hey, El-Tee, can I take point?"

The lieutenant nodded, and the toadlike scout scuttled quickly ahead. The rest of the Rebels trailed behind him. As the stars began to wink into view, they quietly made their way through the gap in the hills.

Arvee sneezed. "I really hate all this dust," he cursed under his breath, as he ran a webbed digit across the blaster rifle's trigger. "Good thing we won't be here long." He reached the far end of the gap and glanced across an uneven arid field. "Why, I could take them all out without a bother. Fast. All by my scaly lonesome. Forget prisoners. And then...." His raspy breath caught in his throat and his legs locked in place as he spotted something at the edge of his vision—several Imperial system patrol craft. There was a building behind the ships. "That isn't one outpost," he whispered in as soft a voice as he could manage. "Or two or three. It's an Imperial base. With lots of weapon emplacements." The dust swirled around his hind legs as his comrades caught up with him.



"It's all this dust!" the freighter pilot groaned. "Dust 'n sand. Every time I stay in Mos Eisley for more 'n a few days the stuff gets in my droid's joints. Makes it act up or shut down. Can ya do somethin' about it?"

Amalk Wulqpark eyed the sand-pitted protocol droid the pilot had roughly ushered into his shop. "You shouldn't leave him outside then," Amalk suggested. "Dust wouldn't be a problem if you kept him on your ship."

"Can't keep it on my ship. I need it nearby 'n case I come across someone or somethin' I wanna talk to. For business."

"And you conduct your business on the street?"

"Sometimes. 'N in the cantina, too. But the cantina rules...well, they won't let me take it inside," the pilot returned. "So I keep it just outside the door. Next best thing."

Then you must spend an awful lot of time inside the cantina, Amalk thought, for all this dust damage to occur.

Amalk leaned across the counter and ran his age-spotted hands over the droid's tarnished face. It was a kind gesture that was lost on the pilot, but not on the ailing droid. "You're in need of an oil bath, my new friend," Amalk said softly. "Hammer out a few of these dents."

"Huh?"

"I said fixing him shouldn't be too much of a problem," he said more loudly. "It looks like his photoreceptors are damaged."

The pilot raised an eyebrow and his lips parted in an unspoken question.

"Photoreceptors," Amalk explained. "Your droid's eyes, the devices that snag the light rays—natural and manufactured—and convert them into electronic signals. The signals are processed by the video computer at the base of his head and are translated into images so he can see. Operates on the same principle as human eyes. In any event, the casings are cracked. Dust got inside and choked the workings."

"Hate all this dust," the pilot grumbled.

Amalk's rheumy blue eyes narrowed. "Hmm. Not just the casings. You've got other problems, too, don't you fellow?" He was chatting to the droid, and the droid began to talk back.

"What's that noise?" the pilot cut in. "That squawky stuff? Somethin' wrong with its vocalizer?"

"Vocabulator. Speech synthesizer."

"Yeah. That's what I meant. Is it broken, too?"

Amalk shook his head. "It's not noise," he muttered. "It's language."

"Not one I understand," the pilot retorted.

"Few do."

But Amalk was one of those few. What sounded like insects buzzing around the cramped shop's interior was a specialized program language. Droids often used it to communicate among themselves. It was largely unintelligible to organics. Amalk buzzed fluently—questions upon questions tumbling from his lips. The droid quickly provided answers.

"So you travel a lot, I imagine, being a freighter pilot," Amalk said, finally returning his attention to the pilot.

"Yeah."

"Get to see much of the galaxy?"

"Yeah. I get around. Even been to the Corporate Sector a few times."



"Ever travel in Imperial territory?" Amalk asked as he popped the chestplate off the droid and looked inside.

"Yeah. Not that it's any of your business, though."

"I'd bet that's dangerous. Imperial assault shuttles buzzing around, maybe even a Star Destroyer. But then you look like you're not afraid of much."

"I'm not." The pilot puffed out his chest. "Besides, it's not all that dangerous for me. I got some contacts, do some odd jobs for 'em now and again. Just occasional stuff. Stay friendly with 'em and you're better off. Healthier and wealthier. Know what I mean?"

"Indeed I do." Amalk's thick fingers prodded the droid's wires and circuits. "Hmmm. What have we here?"

The pilot moved closer, tried to peer over Amalk's shoulder to get a look inside the droid's chest.

"Not good," Amalk tsked. "Not good at all. See this?"

"What? Dust got inside there, too?"

"No. The locomotor. It's wearing out. It will need to be replaced right away. Your droid probably won't be able to take more than another hundred steps or so under his own power before the locomotor burns out."

"Good thing I brought it to ya to fix then." The pilot looked pleased with himself. "Back at the hangar, they said ya was the best. Also said that your lift tube didn't go all the way to the top level...if ya know what I mean. Said ya think more of droids than people. Don't matter to me none about your preferences. Me, I'm just passin' through, an' I need ya to fix it."

"Him."

"Huh?"

"Fix him. Fix your droid."

"Yeah. What's a locomotor? I know ships 'n all. Been flyin' a freighter for years. Droids, well, that's somethin' I never took to studyin'."

"A locomotor is the servomechanism that gives your droid—and other protocol droids, scout droids, and others like them—the ability to walk, to move."

"So can you replace it?"

"Yes. No problem. But not at the moment. I don't have any spare locomotors in the shop. They're on order. Expected on the next

**"Thank
the Maker I
am rid of
him!"
the sand-
pitted
protocol
droid said.**

merchant transport."

"When'll that be."

"Next week."

"So whadda I do? I gotta be leavin' in a day, no more 'n two. Got someplace I gotta go, an appointment ta keep. I need it ta translate for me."

"Him."

"Yeah. I need *him* ta translate for me."

"You could buy another protocol unit. I have a few on sale." Amalk eased away from the pilot's droid and gestured at his shop's walls.

Amalk's shop consisted of one large room, which when it was built would have been called spacious. Now it seemed small and crowded. The walls were lined with droids. Like soldiers, a few dozen protocol droids stood in a row, their silver, gold, brass, and bronze metal plating gleaming in the light that spilled through the lone window.

Nearby were several R2, R4, and R5 units, and something that looked like a prototype or a modification of another R-series model. Remotes of various sizes hung from the ceiling, blinking and whirring like cantina decorations. Not true droids, they were programmable to perform simple functions and had no independent initiative.

There were also medical droids, mining droids, power droids, companion droids, exploration droids, scout droids, geo-survey droids, and more. One, which looked like a refitted interrogation droid, was busy dusting the place. Behind the counter were shelves upon shelves filled with metal legs, arms, wheels, treads, spools of wire, circuits, chips, and hundreds of small tools.

"I kinda like that silver one," the pilot said after looking everything over. "Haven't had a silver one before. Is it on sale?"

Amalk nodded. "Yes, he's on sale."

"How much?"

"Trade in this droid, which I'll repair when I get the locomotor shipment, and throw in seven hundred credits. The silver droid's yours."

"Six."

"Six-fifty."

"Deal." The pilot fumbled in his pocket for a credstick. "Got a restraining bolt for it? Notice none of your droids here got 'em attached."

"Haven't had need for them." Amalk reached under the counter and fumbled around. "This'll serve." He passed it to the pilot, and the transaction was concluded.

"Uh, thanks," the pilot said as he exited the shop. "Wouldn't be able to get my business done properly without one of these droids." The silver protocol unit cast a last glance at Amalk, uttered a string of rushed sentences in a program language, and followed his new owner.

"Is the pilot gone?" This from an outmoded geo-survey droid.

"The ignoramus," a partially-repaired chef droid retorted. "I've known smarter remotes."

"He's crossing the street," a gold protocol droid said. He was craning his shiny neck as far as it would go and leaning away from the wall for a better view of the departing customer. "There. Out of sight. Headed with C3-LD8 toward the hangar. Poor Eldee."

The other protocol droids moved away from the wall and started chatting to themselves and Amalk. The R5 units chirped and hooted. And the chef droid ran through the ingredients it needed for Amalk's dinner.

"Good riddance to that customer," the gold protocol added. "Tatooline will be better for his departure. At least he's the type Amalk likes to sell to."

"Thank the Maker I am rid of him!" the sand-pitted protocol droid said. "I had quite my fill of working for that boorish man. Occasional dealings with Imperials, he claims! Hah! He works for them all the time, is leaving now for a rendezvous with an Imperial captain. They use him, though he doesn't realize it. Hire him to make runs into neutral territory or to Alliance-held worlds. He is not very bright for an organic, does not see how they manipulate him so. Does not see how truly evil they are. And might I interject that there is nothing wrong with my locomotor."

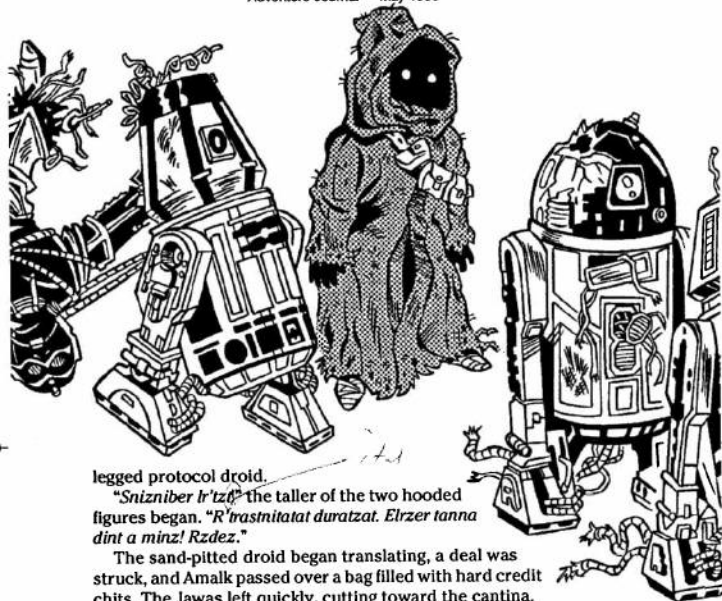
"I know," Amalk said.

"Then why...."

"Because I *am* very bright for an organic," he returned. "It's a long story, my new friend. You see...."

"Company!" the scout droid announced. The gold protocol droid leaned back against the wall and his fellows quickly joined him. They pretended to shut themselves off. The R5 units fell silent.

A soft buzz cut through the air as the door opened. Amalk watched a pair of Jawas trundle inside. They were leading a quartet of battle-damaged astromechs, one of which was pulling a one-



legged protocol droid.

"Snizniber l'r'tz!" the taller of the two hooded figures began. "R'trasnitatat duratzat. Elrzer tanna dint a minz! Rzdez."

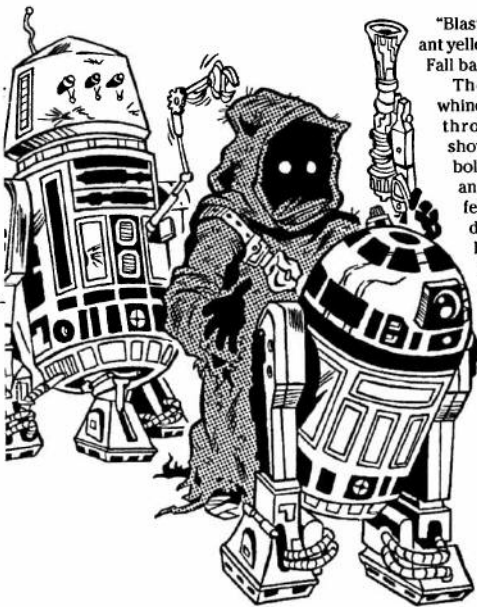
The sand-pitted droid began translating, a deal was struck, and Amalk passed over a bag filled with hard credit chits. The Jawas left quickly, cutting toward the cantina.

"Looks like blaster fire. On all five of them." It was the deep voice of the scout droid. He stepped close to Amalk's new acquisitions, and his shoulders moved in the approximation of a shudder. Jawas always made the scout droid more than a little edgy.

"Perhaps. But the scoring looks like a vibroweapon of some sort," added one of the medical droids. "Note the cut along right wheel-mount. And that is likely what sheered off the leg of the protocol unit. I have witnessed...."

"I agree," interjected the gold protocol droid. "Why, when I served on a mining ship in orbit about Tibrin there was a Gamorrean who...."

"No. Definitely blasters," the scout argued. "Rifles likely."



"Blaster fire!" the lieutenant yelled. "Rifles! It's a trap! Fall back to the ship!"

The high-pitched whines of blaster rifles cut through the air. Dirt showered up where the bolts missed the Rebels and instead hit at their feet. Where the bolts didn't miss, the Rebels fell, clutching their legs and chests. The scent of burned cloth and flesh was heavy in the air. A dozen men were on the ground, dead or dying in the space of a heartbeat.

"Fall back! Now!" The lieutenant pressed himself against the side of the hill. He cursed himself for cutting through the gap. It was a perfect site for an

ambush, he realized. Only thing was, the Imperials weren't supposed to know company was coming. They weren't supposed to be lying in wait. And there weren't supposed to be so damn many of them.

He craned his neck forward, straining to look at the top of the hill across from him, eyes stinging from the dust that was flying everywhere. There! Prone, a few dozen stormtroopers. He saw the moonlight glinting off their white helmets. *All armed with blaster rifles, looks like*, he thought. Probably pistols for close-in fighting—though he knew his men wouldn't be able to scramble up the hillsides quick enough to get close. Must be an equal number of stormtroopers on the hill above him. A whole lot more than the Alliance intelligence report said would be here.

"Can't fall back!" came a cry from somewhere behind the lieutenant. "Coming in the gap behind us, boxing us in like Roon mogos!"

"How many?" the lieutenant shouted.

"Twenty, thirty!" came the hoarse reply.

"Hard to tell. The dust's so thick!"

A decision, the lieutenant thought. *Have to make a decision now.*

"Swarming us from the base up ahead! Coming at us on speeders!" The lieutenant recognized that voice. It was Arvee, his second. "I'd say your informer was wrong, El-T. I'd say we're the zilg-dicody, and the Imps are gonna feast on us!"

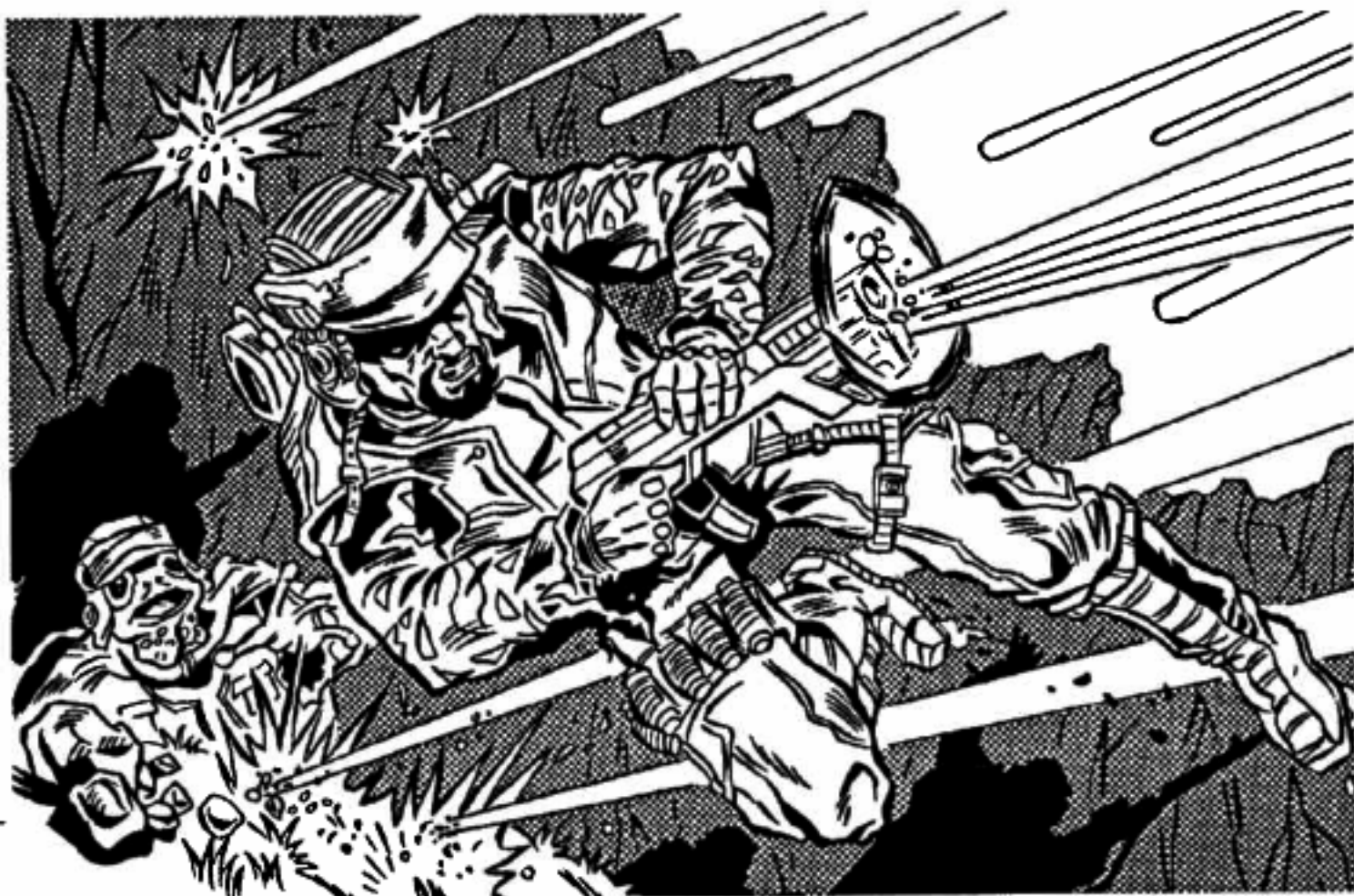
"No!" the lieutenant screamed. "We're not going down tonight!" He darted away from the slope and hit the ground, rolling and dodging blaster fire. He paused only to take a couple of shots at the white helmet peering over the hilltop, then he kept rolling, not bothering to see if he had hit the

stormtrooper. *Have to get a look at the other side of the hill*, he thought. *Just to be sure. Maybe my guess is wrong, maybe there's not a few dozen stormtroopers up there. Maybe we could charge up that hill, circle round, get back to the shuttle. Maybe...* The keen whine of a tripod-mounted repeating blaster cut through the din. A knifing pain shot up the lieutenant's right leg and into his stomach. Then the lieutenant felt nothing, couldn't move. *Dying*, he thought, *probably lasered my leg off. Can't feel, can't hardly swallow. So cold.* "Arvee! Your command now! Get the men out of here!"

He didn't hear the toadlike quadruped's reply. The lieutenant was beyond hearing anything.

"Fall back!" Arvee hollered. "Might be fewer in front of us, but it's

He hoisted the rifle and waited, intending to shoot at the first glint of white he could spot when the dust settled.



suicide heading toward the base." He slung his blaster rifle over his back and scuttled toward the bulk of his men, moving faster without having to hold onto his weapon. He leapt over the body of a Devaronian, registered that at least a third of his fellow Rebels were littering the dusty ground. *Should have brought more men, more shuttles. But this was supposed to be a small operation, he thought. Where did all the Imps come from? Must've been monitoring our descent. Waited till we were easy pickings.*

Just ahead to his left, three Corellians were squeezed together in a niche under a rocky overhang. They were taking turns poking their heads out and shooting at the white helmets on the opposite ridge.

"Too many of them!" Arvee called as he scampered toward the trio. "Fighting retreat!" He paused when he reached the overhang, slung his blaster rifle off his back again and took aim at a stormtrooper descending the opposite slope. His webbed finger pumped the trigger, sending light-blue bolts of energy *kzinging* off the dirt and rocks, finally finding a mark on the trooper's torso. The

stormtrooper fell. But there were more coming over the ridge now. "Leave me one of your rifles!" he barked. One of the Corellians complied, then the three took off running.

"Fall back!" Arvee shouted at more Rebel soldiers as he wedged himself into the niche vacated by the three Corellians. He hunkered as close to the ground as he could, and his webbed fingers flew over his own blaster rifle, tugging at the stock, opening the compartment where the packs that powered the rifle were held, yanking the packs out. He grabbed his spare packs from his belt and held them all together. Then he fumbled with the rifle strap, used it to bind the packs tight. He grimaced when he saw a half-dozen more of his fellows fall to blaster fire.

"See how you like this," he cursed softly. He heaved the bundled blaster packs toward the slope the stormtroopers were climbing down, picked up the borrowed rifle, and fired at the bundle.

The explosion rocked the gap. Dirt and gravel showered the stormtroopers and Arvee. Barely over the rumble, the toadlike quadruped heard the screams of dying Imperials. He hoisted the rifle and waited, intending to shoot at the first glint of white he could spot when the dust settled.



"Settled in for the evening, sir?" the scout droid flipped up the "closed" sign on Amalk's shop and glanced around to make sure everything was secure. The only light inside was over a worktable where several tools were carefully laid out. Most of the droids had shut themselves down. A few were in the back room taking an oil bath and watching the R2 units gather around the hologameboard.

"No. I'm going to work late tonight."

"On the Jawas' astromechs?"

Amalk shook his head. "Tomorrow for them. I'm more interested in the one-legged protocol droid."

"A sleek design, sir. Nothing I've seen before, and I've seen quite a few come through your shop. Either a very new model or a one-of-a-kind design specially commissioned. Mmmm. I suppose it might also be a very old one, an antique that has been kept in good

shape." The scout cocked his head. "Except for the missing leg, of course."

"I'll have to use that one." Amalk pointed to an olive-gray leg hanging behind the counter. "At least until I can fashion one to match the rest of his body."

"I am certain Y3-FE9 could help. He's becoming increasingly proficient at welding joints. I would help if I could. But mechanics and electronics are not my areas of expertise."

Amalk didn't reply. He was busy carrying the black protocol droid over to his worktable. With the dust brushed off its casings, the droid looked smooth and glossy, with few sharp angles. Nothing marred its metal surface. He laid it down almost reverently. "I told the Jawas I was only buying you for spare parts. Truly thought so at the time," he said to himself. "But maybe I can get you running. You'd be quite the showpiece. Wonder what languages you know? How many? Wonder where you've been. Who made you?"

"If you do not need me for anything sir, I would like to go out back and watch the hologame."

Amalk wagged his fingers, dismissing the scout droid. "Hmm. Maybe I could sell you to a crime lord who collects fine droids. Or to a merchant who travels Imperial lanes. No matter who I sell you to, you'll make a magnificent informer." He flipped open the chestplate and began humming. Picking through his tools, Amalk began repairing the droid.

"Definitely fixable," he said after a few hours had passed and a thorough memory flush was finished. "Not in such bad shape after all. No. Not at all. Language chip intact. The Jawas didn't know what they had. All you need now is a new leg, a specially-fitted reactivator switch, and my deeply-implanted intelligence program. Undetectable, unflushable. Perfect." He continued to hover over the droid.

"No one will ever learn you're working for the Alliance. Your photoreceptors and audial recorders will absorb all manner of Imperial activity, and you'll report back to me whenever you're able to sneak away to download information. Why, maybe I'll even be able to sell you to an Imperial officer. Shine you up just right to catch his attention. You'd gain first-hand information. Yes, you'll make a fine addition to the Rebel spy network. You know, I've placed nearly 50 droids with my program seeded deep inside them. They've been spying on the Empire for more than a year. You'll join them shortly."

He oiled the black droid's motivator, then carefully polished the

metal plates that covered most of the body. "You are a beauty," he whistled softly. The droid's face was well-defined, not unlike the visage of the chef droid he'd acquired a few weeks ago. But this one was almost handsome by human terms. The brow swept back to form a ridge that looked like the rounded knuckles of a closed fist. "Judging by that overlarge locomotor, I'd say you will be able to move quickly. Oil you enough and you'll be quiet, too. You have some interesting attachments and compartments. I'll look those over in the morning."

Amalk pushed himself away from the workbench and retrieved the olive-gray leg. "Hate to put this on you, but I want you up and walking around. Make you a little lopsided, but just for a couple of days. Efeenine will help me craft you a new leg, black and shiny, so well-made that no one but me and you—and Efee, of course—will know it's not your original. There!" He attached the wires from the gray leg to the droid's hip, oiled the joints, then connected the power unit.

The black droid's eyes glowed white against the inky sockets.



Arvee stared up at the stars, white pinpricks against the black sky. Most of the dust had settled, revealing that his makeshift bomb had taken out quite a few stormtroopers. Their armor-clad bodies were scattered among the downed Rebels, arms and legs at odd angles like broken dolls. So many bodies.

The toadlike quadruped swallowed hard. He'd been in firefights, but not in any with this many casualties. "Back to the shuttle!" he called to the remaining Rebels. "Move your feet or none of us will be making it off this dirtball!"

There were still several dozen stormtroopers to contend with—easily three times as many as there were Rebels still standing. But Arvee trusted that his men were better than the Imps. He cocked his wide head and picked up what sounded like an incessant wail. The speeder bikes had reached the far end of the gap. They'd be here in the space of a few heartbeats. The noise was loud and of varying pitches. Arvee swore under his breath. There were more speeder

bikes than he had first guessed.

"Be quick!" he hollered to his men. He squatted amid the bodies between the two hills, hoping his coloration would help hide him. Arvee intended to cover the retreating Rebels, even though he suspected his heroism would cost him his life. He would take a lot of stormtroopers with him, he knew, and prayed enough Rebels would make it back to the shuttle to man the craft and report the Vengler incident.

Behind him the sound of blaster rifles continued. Both sides were firing, he surmised, as the Imps' rifles had a higher tone to them. There was another explosion in the distance. Arvee could tell one of his men had fashioned a makeshift bomb out of blaster packs. Faintly, he heard a victory cry. The voice was Sullustan. He allowed himself a weak smile.

**"You'll gain
no informa-
tion from me
or my men,"
Arvee spat.**

"Maybe the two-leggers can make it out of here after all," he whispered. Then the speeder bikes were practically on top of him, and he made out the forms of stormtroopers running behind them. "Where did all of these Imps come from?" He swiveled his borrowed rifle and began thumbing the trigger. He aimed for the lead bikes' engines, netting two before the scout troopers realized what was happening. The bikes sparked and sputtered and took their hapless riders careening along what was left of the hillside. "Two down, ten to go," he grumbled as he dodged a blast from a bike cannon and saw another bike headed straight toward him. "Ah, womp rats. That one spotted me."

Arvee darted to his right as a speeder bike cannon blasted the spot he'd been occupying only a moment before. He spun about on his rear legs, raised his rifle, and felt himself flying forward. A scout on another bike had passed behind him, ramming the stock of his blaster soundly against the quadruped's skull.

"Gather the prisoners." Arvee faintly heard the stormtrooper's voice as he was drifting toward unconsciousness. "We've plenty of room for them on the ship."

Arvee woke in the cargo hold, his legs shackled to the wall. His head hurt and his lungs burned from inhaling all the dust and the blaster fire-tinged air. He squinted through the dim light and focused on his fellow Rebels. He counted 20, all shackled like himself. That meant 130 had died in the ambush. Perhaps, if the

Force was with them, some had escaped.

He shook his head. "Wasn't supposed to happen this way," he muttered.

"Certainly it was." The voice was clipped and laced with arrogance, coming from a shadowed doorway.

Arvee peered into the darkness, his eyes separating the shadows until he found the lanky body of an Imperial captain. The captain smiled and took a few steps closer.

"Your information was wrong," the captain said smugly. "Your droid spy was fed false reports, made to believe there was only a small outpost near the mine."

"The base...." Arvee began.

"Has been on Vengler for quite some time," the captain finished. "Why?"

The captain laughed. "Why go to all this trouble to defeat only one handful of Rebel soldiers? Not just one. Dozens. You see, there are other traps being sprung as we speak."

Arvee sagged against the wall.

"You, and the captured Rebels from our other operations, will be taken to a stronghold on Wayland, where you will be..." he paused, searching for a word. "Expertly questioned."

"You'll gain no information from me or my men," Arvee spat.

"Oh, but we will. Eventually. And it will help lead to the downfall of your pitiable Alliance. You cannot win. The Empire is too strong, has tendrils everywhere. Now, if I were you, I'd get some rest. This will be the last good night's sleep you'll have."



"I need to get some sleep." Amalk backed away from the black protocol droid and ran his fingers through his thinning hair. "Been working on you all night." He glanced toward the shop window, where the pink light of dawn was peeking through. "Yes, get a couple of hours of rest, then give you an oil bath. Put you on display."

He'd made room for the new droid. Amalk's line of protocol droids had an empty space, right in the center. The protocol units

were all shut down, conserving their power for the coming day. The astromechs had long-since finished their hologames and had joined the rest of Amalk's inventory in what passed for sleep.

"You can stay up if you like," Amalk said to his new acquisition. "Make yourself at home. Think of a name for yourself." He yawned and rubbed his eyes. "See you after a nap."

The droid's white eyes watched Amalk head to the back room. His black head swiveled silently this way and that, taking in the stock of droids, noting none were active, not even the scout. But to be certain.... The droid glided behind the counter, retrieved the restraining bolts Amalk kept there for customers. There were just enough for the droids it considered a threat. Finished, it moved noiselessly forward, following Amalk's path. It stepped through the doorway, raised its right arm, and a thin blaster beam shot from a palm-plate and struck the back of the tinker as he was pulling up the comforter and climbing into bed.

"Wha...." Amalk fell to his knees and immediately fumbled in his pocket for his sole weapon, a small hold-out blaster he always kept with him in the event someone tried to rob his shop. He tugged it free and gritted his teeth as he turned to face the intruder. The pain from the wound renewed its intensity when he moved, and he bit down on his lower lip to keep from crying out. Then his mouth dropped open when he saw the black protocol droid take aim at him.

"You?" Amalk fired. The beam from his weapon glanced off the glossy metal and ricocheted harmlessly away. He fired again and again as the droid walked closer.

"No," the droid said.

It was the first word Amalk had heard the droid speak. *It must have connected its vocabulator, he thought, when I was busy cleaning my tools. But why? I wiped its memory. It's a protocol droid. Not a killer.*

"No," it repeated. "I'll not kill you with this blaster. There would be too many questions." Its angular head swiveled on his neck, its white eyes locked on the vat in which Amalk's droids received oil baths. "Yes."

Amalk crawled toward the back door, his movements slow from age and pain. The droid followed, stopped him with a strong hand on his shoulder. The tinker struggled, but the droid held him fast, then lowered a hand to his other shoulder, picked him up effortlessly.

"Wh-wh-what are you?" Amalk stammered.

"Not a protocol droid, not something to be put on display and sold as a spy." The droid's eyes brightened. "I already *am* a spy. And I serve a master far better than you."

"The Empire," Amalk said.

The droid nodded.

"But I wiped your memory."

"You thought only you could create so complex a program, so deep it could not be detected, not be flushed."

"Someone discovered me."

"And someone is undoing everything you have done."

Amalk sobbed openly. "The Alliance. What have I done?"

The droid carried him to the oil bath, dropped him in the vat and held his head above the inky black surface. "Your nephew will arrive in the spaceport tomorrow and will discover your body. An accident. You drowned while trying to help an astromech out of the vat. Your nephew Eld will inherit your shop and inventory. Pick up where you left off—selling droids that spy for the military." The droid pushed Amalk's head below the surface, held the old man there while he feebly struggled. "But he will sell to a different clientele. And it is the Empire that will profit from the intelligence network."

Amalk's struggles stopped and the droid released the body. It wiped its hands on a towel and returned the shop, finding its place in the line of protocol droids.

It shut itself down.

And it waited.





Roleplaying Game Sourcefile

C1-EZ8

Type: Customized Imperial Assassin Droid

DEXTERITY 2D

Blaster 6D+2, brawling parry 2D+2, dodge 4D+2, melee combat 3D+2, running 3D

KNOWLEDGE 2D

Alien species 5D, languages 7D, law enforcement 4D+1, planetary systems 3D+1, survival 6D

MECHANICAL 2D

PERCEPTION 3D

Con 5D, forgery 4D, persuasion 4D, sneak 4D+2, search 7D+1

STRENGTH 4D

Lifting 6D

TECHNICAL 1D

Computer programming/repair 2D+2, demolitions 5D+1, droid repair 3D+1, security 4D+1

Equipped With:

- Blaster pistol (5D) built into right forearm
- Retractable vibroknife (STR+1D) built into left forearm
- Garrote (STR+1D) built into left hand
- Hip compartment with demolitions kit
- Macrobinoculars built into photoreceptors (*Perception* +2D when viewing far-away areas)
- Recording rod
- Security kit (+1D to security rolls)
- 2 Grenades (5D) stored in leg compartment

Move: 10

Size: 2.0 meters

Cost: Not for sale

Capsule: C1-EZ8 is one of a rare series of droids developed by the Imperial Intelligence's tech bureau. These assassin droids were designed to infiltrate Rebel cells, though lately they've been used by the Ubiquitorate's Renik counter-intelligence branch to put a stop to Alliance espionage



droid operations. Other branches of Imperial Intelligence have requested similar droids, but their assembly is slow—encrypting hidden programs and concealing specialized equipment is not easy or cheap—and few have entered service with other bureaus.

Appearing as a glossy-black protocol droid, Eazy can pass himself off as one; however, he is actually a well-made assassin droid, perceptive and cunning. His built-in tools help him carry out his nefarious missions. Loyalty and combat programming is buried deep inside his processor, so that even repeated memory wipes do not affect his directives.

Quote: "I am fluent in more than three million forms of communication. And I know at least that many ways to kill a man."

Adventure Ideas

Droids for Sale: The characters are in Mos Eisley and hear about a droid sale at the shop of Eld Wulqpark. The prices are on the low-end of reasonable, and there is a wide variety available. Likely Eld makes the characters a deal too good to turn down. In the end, they purchase one or more droids with Imperial spying programs secretly built in. As they continue their adventures, the Empire is always one step behind them all the way, and closing in. The heroes are left to discover how the Empire seems to know their every move. What can they do to shake the Imperials who are dogging their every step?

Ferretting Mission: Two Rebel bases have been compromised, and they were evacuated just before Imperial forces moved in. Rebel Intelligence agents are certain spies imbedded deep within the Alliance are responsible. The characters are appointed the task of discovering who is leaking information about Rebel fortifications. They must work quickly, as the Alliance cannot afford to lose more bases.

Intrigue in Mos Eisley: A passing frigate captain, loyal to the Rebellion, reported picking up a transmission from an Alliance vessel the characters were on. The message went to somewhere in Mos Eisley, and it was coded and suspicious. The frigate captain notified the Alliance vessel commander immediately. With work, the characters are able to decipher the transmission—it's a report to Imperial agents about the Rebel vessel's activities. The heroes must discover who sent the message from their ship, who received it on the other end, and stop up the intelligence leak.

LOVE IS A WARM BLASTER

By Paul Danner

Illustrations by Talon Dunning

The clean-cut young man stepped out of Loose Cannon Arms, carrying a small package tucked under his arm. His nondescript face blended seamlessly in the crowd of people wandering one of Coruscant's nearly endless shopping districts. No one even spared a second glance when he ducked into a small service alley and began speaking to the shadows. "He's in there. You good to go?"

A quick check of the hold-out tucked away in her waistband told her the small blaster was fully charged. She knew the feeling well. Daniera Karmony took a calming breath, letting the tension slip from her body. She smiled brilliantly at Cabe. "Good to go."

"The General's counting on you." Cabe paused and touched Daniera's shoulder. "We all are. Just be careful. He used to be one of us, but nobody knows why the man left. Maybe not even Cracken. His service records are sealed at the highest levels."

She nodded gravely and prepared to go shopping....



"Can I help you?"

Daniera looked up from the display of blaster carbines that stretched across the back wall of Loose Cannon Arms. The young

woman's gaze casually traversed rack after rack of glistening black weaponry and finally came to rest on the older man sitting behind the counter. The proprietor of the Cannon studied Daniera with a bemused little grin as he casually sipped from a steaming mug.

"Actually, I'm just looking around," she said with a shrug. "Thanks anyway." She studied him with a peripheral glance. On second thought, he didn't seem advanced in age so much as spirit. His were eyes that had seen more than a lifetime's worth. But there was also something else there...a glimmer even the heavy weight of time could not diminish.

The man nodded serenely. "Well, you just let me know if you

"Back after all this time, huh?" He shrugged. "I thought he'd retired."

need anything, hon." The grin contorted into something more akin to a smirk as he took another drink. "I proudly offer a 20 percent discount to nerfs."

Daniera was staring at him now. "Excuse me?"

"Oh. Sorry. Nerfs...my preferred acronym for operatives of the New Republic Security Force." He flashed a brilliant smile. "No

offense intended, of course."

"I have no idea what—" Daniera paused, then shook her head. "How did you know?"

"Don't feel bad, sweets. It isn't that obvious, unless you know what to look for."

"Such as?"

"It's bad business to give away trade secrets." He put the mug down. "That's why I sell customized weapons...and not the blueprints."

Daniera leaned on the transparisteel counter. "Humor me."

The man sighed with feigned reluctance for a moment. "Well, I don't get many female browsers in here and the few who do come by usually get caught up with the junk in those cases," he said, indicating the one she was leaning on. "Cutesy little palm blasters, hold-outs with pearl lacquer finish that fit comfortably in the handbag, that sort of thing."

Daniera started to protest, but he cut her off before she could get out a single syllable. "That's all fact by the way, free of sexist opinion. Anyway, you were eyeing the good stuff on the back wall,

appreciating some of my better work, and that means you're not a casual enthusiast. Then there's that bulge in your jacket that," he flashed the grin again, "assuming no odd physical abnormalities, looks to me just like a BlasTech CMP 489 pistol—flavor of the moment for New Republic Security."

Daniera folded her arms across her chest. "You're pretty good, but—"

He held up a hand. "You didn't let me finish...however, you're a bit too much of a looker for standard Security or even SpecForce, so my guess would be NRI. I know how that old bantha Cracken loves to throw folks a curve by utilizing attractive women...." After a final, triumphant sip from his mug, he added, "Well, at least when their mouths aren't dangling open like that. Kind of subtracts from the enchantress equation." He sat back in the chair and beamed. "So, any questions?"

After taking a moment to regain her composure she nodded. "Just one...what in the galaxy possessed the great M'Kyas Love to let his considerable talents go to waste appraising customers in a back-end weapon shop on Coruscant?"

"For your information, I only sell high-quality merchandise, and—" his eyes narrowed dangerously "—my custom creations sell for more credits than you've probably seen in your lifetime, girl."

"You'd be surprised."

"Well, now I know who you are and you know who I am." He picked up his empty mug and started walking to the back of the store. "I dislike playing games with no wagering involved, so why don't you just save us both some lifetime and tell me what you want."

"Grandyl Grieve."

To her credit, Daniera didn't flinch as the mug hit the floor and shattered.

M'Kyas Love slowly turned back around to face her. With the touch of a button, the lumasign on his front door flashed from "open" to "closed."

He slowly held out a hand, gesturing Daniera toward a back room.

"Let's talk."



"Grandyl Grieve. Now there's a name I haven't heard for a long time." Love slid a steaming mug in front of Daniera and sat down beside her. "A fellow Latarzian and one of the deadliest assassins ever spawned by the Empire. Erroneously believed to be deceased many times over, he has the annoying habit of surviving certain doom. As I recall, he hasn't been heard from since the Battle of Endor. That was quite a few years ago."

Daniera cautiously took a sip of the proffered drink, decided she liked it and let the hot liquid warm her up. "Well, he's back. Hired by an unknown Imperial party to assassinate key officials of the New Republic." She returned the mug to its coaster with a resounding thump. "And so far he's doing a marvelous job."

Love leaned back in his chair. "Back after all this time, huh?" He shrugged. "I thought he'd retired."

Daniera cocked an eyebrow. "You don't seem too concerned by the news of his return."

"Should I be?"

"As the story goes, it was your relentless pursuit that finally drove him underground. And since Grieve is apparently taking up old hobbies, don't you think he'd love to take a shot at his arch-nemesis?"

"I think you've been watching too many holos, girl."

"The reality is people are dying. Another senator was found murdered this morning. That makes four in less than two weeks. Each one more important than the last."

"I thought the New Republic espoused equality," he said with a chuckle.

"You know what I mean," Daniera snapped, growing more irritated. "So far we're snapping at shadows. No one even knows what the Sithspawn looks like."

"I do." He paused. "And that's why you're here."

"There has only been one break so far. Our agents have uncovered the identity of Grieve's next target: Chief of State Leia Organa Solo." Daniera took a deep breath before continuing. "You got closer to this monster than anyone else. We need your help."

He shook his head. "Grieve may not be retired, but I am. I've done more than my share of skip tracing, bounty hunting, private investigating, and sector rangering. I served my time in the nerfs and played superspy for General Cracken." Love stood up, his eyes locked onto Daniera. "So you can go back and tell Cracken that my remaining years are going to be spent doing things that don't

involve being shot, tortured, or otherwise mauled."

Daniera was silent for a long moment, then abruptly got to her feet. She was at the door in a few short strides, but paused briefly to regain eye contact with Love. "General Cracken thought you might refuse. He told me to give you this." She slipped something into his hand and then walked toward the front door without another word.

Love reluctantly glanced down at the data chip, carefully running his fingers along the gleaming ridged surface. It had been erased. Cracken did love his irony, after all.... "Wait."

One hand on the door, Daniera looked at him over her shoulder.

He touched a finger to the wall and a secret panel slid away to reveal a recessed compartment. From inside Love removed a large replihide shoulder holster that cradled what was quite possibly the nastiest-looking heavy blaster pistol Daniera had ever seen. Surprisingly, its bulk slipped easily into place under Love's left arm. He shrugged on a worn but expensive overcoat that easily concealed the huge weapon.

"Okay. I'm ready."

It was Daniera's turn to smirk. "For what?"

"I don't know, hon," he said, patting the bulge under his coat, "but with the mood I'm in right now it had better involve shooting a lot of people."



The New Republic Security detail at the door watched quietly as Daniera and Love exited the turbolift and made their way down the hall. The pair of heavily armed troopers shifted their weight slightly, greeting the newcomers with the business end of two blaster carbines.

Daniera flashed her identification and the guards immediately stood at ease, allowing them passage into the hotel room. She stepped in first, pulling on a pair of Duraguard examination gloves.

Love paused, glancing back down the hall at the teams of NRI agents electronically sweeping the area for the tiniest clues. He shrugged as he followed Daniera into the room, closing the door behind them.

She was already moving methodically through the living area. "The entire floor has been shut down by New Republic Security. As

we speak, NRI agents are interviewing the entire staff, conducting molecular-level scans, and reviewing guest records for the past month."

Love nodded. "That's good. A waste of time and money, but hey, a bureaucracy is still a bureaucracy no matter how high-minded its morals may be."

Daniera stared at him, her mouth struggling to catch up to her thoughts.

He held up a hand. "Sorry. Just give me the specs, okay? Say, do you mind if I call you Dani?"

"Yes."

"Good. Go ahead, Dani..."

Daniera sighed. "Victim number four is Senator Luralon Odaay, near-human Turian from the Limbala sector. He was 47 standard years of age, married, with one child. Senator Odaay frequently returns to his homeworld when the Senate-in-whole is adjourned, so when it is in session, he only keeps a hotel room

Cracken raised his eyebrows, studying the Major. "So you feel I am making a mistake, Cabe?"

in lieu of permanent Coruscant residence." She gestured at the well-kept room. "The Kaerlia Queen has been his favorite the last few years. In fact, he requested this same room last year."

Love absorbed the information. "No sign of forced entry and the murder took place...." His eyes searched out the entrance to the bedroom. "In there?"

Daniera nodded her head slowly, apparently unenthused about revisiting the crime scene.

He walked past her, slipping on a pair of Duraguard gloves. "How do you know it's Grieve?"

"Bloody and violent death."

"Most homicides fall into that category."

"And the Sithspawn left his calling card. Grieve," she hissed through clenched teeth, "What kind of name is that, anyway?"

"Latarzian. At birth we're only given our first names. Our surnames are earned from our actions."

"But 'Grieve'?"

His voice became distant. "His parents probably lamented the

fact that they gave birth to him."

Daniera gave him a look. "Then I'm not sure I want to know."

"What?"

"About your surname...Love?"

He offered only a leering smile and a wink. "Ask me again sometime."

Love flashed her a morbid smile of amusement, then entered the bedroom.



Senator Odaay's corpse was strewn face down across the emperor-sized bed. The thick sheets had absorbed most of the dark blue blood; the plush Tapani carpet had soaked up the rest. A gold-handled vibroknife was jutting out from the small of the victim's back. Certainly not the killing blow, probably inflicted post-mortem. Grandyl Grieve's personalized calling card, derived from his name; Grandyl was the Latarzian word for gold.

Love paused at the entrance, surveying the scene for a full minute before approaching the victim's body.

Daniera quietly slid into the room behind him. For her tough demeanor and experience, she was still a young agent—new to many horrors of the business.

He glanced back at her and smiled reassuringly. "You know what the problem is with beings today?" She shook her head, eyes focused on the grisly sight.

"Well, I'll tell you. Nobody can ever keep their snouts out of everybody else's business. The galaxy would be a nicer place if we all just minded our own affairs." Love crouched down over the body, conducting a careful examination. The man had flopped over the bed, one six-fingered hand draped across a pillow. The other was hanging over the far side of the bed. Love circled around to get a better look. It was clenched in a tight fist. "Fact is, 45 percent of homicide customers are stiff 'cause they followed their sense of smell to the great beyond."

He had her attention now. Daniera folded her arms and just stared at him. "Is that so?"

"Yup," Love said through gritted teeth as he tried to pry open the dead man's fist. "That reminds me...you know what the least used sense is?"

She watched him struggle with the corpse, and shrugged non-committally.

"Common sense," Love grunted as he accidentally snapped off two fingers. Senator Odaay had been clenching a tiny figurine.

Shocked, Daniera quickly stepped forward.

Love used his arm to wipe the sweat beading at his forehead. "The other 45 percent are your typical crimes of passion," he said with a salacious wink. "Nothing sours as badly as love. Well, except maybe lum."

"Do you ever shut up?" she said as she stepped next to him.

"The last 10 percent are your basic poor shlubs who just get caught in the crossfire." He turned the statuette over and over in his hands. It was a rather stunning likeness of Darth Vader. "Funny thing is, folks are the most worried about being plugged in the last category. They ask me how they can avoid getting hit. I tell 'em all the same thing...." He twisted the little Lord of the Sith's head with an audible click.

"Duck." Daniera watched in amazement as a miniature lightsaber hologram emitted from the tiny gloved hand. Love handed her the Vader replica and she carefully touched the small saber. It sparked slightly, giving her a minute shock.

Love carefully turned the corpse over onto its back and studied the carnage. The dead Senator sported a massive hole in the center of his chest, ringed with obvious blaster scoring. Love studied the mortal wound for a moment, giving a low whistle through his teeth.

He started to move back, then paused. He abruptly leaned forward until his nose was nearly touching the dead Senator's neck and sniffed. "Hmmm...."

Daniera turned Vader's head, disengaging the lightsaber with a tiny whoosh. "So what do we have?"

"I got a corpse that took what looks like a blaster artillery hit at point-blank range." Love turned back to Daniera. "I got no witnesses, no point of entry, and no defensive wounds."

"Just like the other three crime scenes." Daniera couldn't resist a self-satisfied smile. "You haven't told me anything I didn't already know."

Love continued as if she hadn't even spoken. "The only thing I do have is a good hunch that our boy here was a member of the Dark Vortex Club."

Daniera's smug smile suddenly vanished.

Love unceremoniously walked to the door, tossing the used

Duraguard gloves over his shoulder. "And all you got, sweets, is a big mess to clean up. My work here is done."

She trailed him outside the hotel room. "That's it?"

"I just gave you all you needed to solve this case," he said, indicating the statuette in her hands. "That's a membership key to the club. But I'm sure you probably already knew that, too."

Daniera stopped for a moment, but Love continued on down the hall. "Well, I would have found this myself..." Then she added under her breath, "Sooner or later."

"Good luck," he called over his shoulder as he entered the turbolift. "If you succeed, I'll send you a beautiful bouquet. If not, I guess I'll send 'em to Organa Solo's funeral."

Love winked at her just before the doors shut and he vanished.



General Cracken turned the small figurine of Darth Vader over and over in his hands. "Not so intimidating at 1/1000 scale, is he?"

Cabe was pacing the office, irritated. "We don't need Love, General."

A ghost of a smile played on Cracken's lips. "Come now. We all need love," the General said softly.

Cabe was too busy ranting to catch the joke. "This is a waste of time and manpower at an inopportune moment."

Cracken raised his eyebrows, studying the Major. "So you feel I am making a mistake, Cabe?"

The NRI agent stopped his pacing for a moment. "With all due respect, General...."

Cracken held up a hand and grinned. "You can stop there. No good news ever begins with that statement." He glanced over at Daniera, who was mercifully seated and up to this point, silent. "What do you think?"

"Love is annoying, egotistical, and utterly devoid of honor." Cabe smirked at her confirmation, but then Daniera thought for a moment. "But he is also intelligent, perceptive, and very experienced."

That wiped away Cabe's smile and brought one to Cracken's lips.

"We could use his help," she continued, "however we can't count on it. This may fall squarely on our shoulders alone."

Cracken absorbed her statement, leaning back in the chair as his

eyes returned to Cabe. "How are the Masquerade preparations proceeding?"

"All of the in-house security equipment is in place. Tech teams are erecting both bio and weapon scanners at each entrance. In addition to uniformed security, we'll have NRI agents in disguise." Cabe shook his head in disgust. "However, I still think we should call off the event entirely. It's too much of a risk. Especially with the life of the Chief of State."

"The New Republic has a firm policy in dealing with threats. We will not bow to terrorism." Cracken's voice softened somewhat. "Besides, Leia would never have agreed to cancel the event. Proceeds from the Maltesara Masquerade benefit hundreds of charities. It is *the* social event on Coruscant."

"And the perfect place for an assassination," Cabe countered.

"It's our job to make sure that doesn't happen." The General handed the figurine back to Daniera. "See what you can dig up at the Vortex...just be very careful."

"Always," Daniera smiled.

"I'd like to go with her," Cabe said.

"Negative, Major. You and I are going to personally supervise the final security preparations at the Grand Ballroom of the Palace." Cracken stood and walked the junior NRI agents to the door. "We each have our duties to carry out."



Daniera pulled the cloak tightly around her as she stepped into the gloomy corridor. Lumas strung haphazardly along the hall offered some illumination, at least the few that were still functioning. She originally had a hard time believing that an exclusive establishment would be found in such a place, but from what she'd recently learned about the clientele of the Dark Vortex, maybe it wasn't quite that strange after all.

Not too far removed from Coruscant's legendary Undercity in location or spirit, the Vortex catered to the movers-and-shakers of the planet's criminal element. Rumor had it that anything (or anyone for that matter) could be bought or sold at the club. Of course, not all the patrons could be directly tied to organized misdeeds; just as many were the idle rich and powerful who thought it exciting to rub elbows with danger.

Daniera frowned at the dilapidated hallway with its leaking hydropipes, fungus-covered walls, and the Maker-knew-what brownish slop covering the pitted floor panels. She knew for a fact there was nothing in the general vicinity she intended to rub elbows with.

Her forward progress was finally halted by a large onyx blast door in good condition. Flecks of white covered the ebony exterior, giving the overall appearance of a starfield.

The smooth door had no apparent control panel, not even a handhold for that matter. Daniera ran a gloved hand over the surface but could not detect a hidden catch, lever, or other mechanism.

An idea suddenly struck her and she reached into a pouch. After a few moments of fishing around, she realized what she was looking for had vanished.

Daniera cursed under her breath and nearly jumped out of her skin when a soft voice emerged from the shadows and asked, "Looking for this?"

The barrel of Daniera's hold-out blaster was suddenly pressing against the underside of the man's chin. "Step into the light," she commanded. "Now."

Grinning, Love did as he was ordered. "Oooh. There's nothing like a woman with command presence."

Daniera tucked the weapon away, eyes flashing with a fiery mixture of anger and relief. "What are you doing here?"

"Evaluating talent," Love said. "You passed." He handed her the Darth Vader statuette.

"So, the great M'Kyas Love is also an accomplished pickpocket."

"There are many, many talents I excel at."

"Such as skulking about in the shadows?"

Love flashed his best grin. "I graduated top of my lurking class."

She nearly smiled, but merely turned back to the door. A quick twist activated the miniature lightsaber. The minute crimson blade cast its eerie glow on the door and...nothing happened.

With a grunt of disgust Daniera prepared to hurl the mini-Vader into hyperspace, but Love placed a restraining hand on her arm. "Wait," he whispered. "Look."

Daniera turned back to face the door and watched in amazement as one of the larger stars in the starfield suddenly began to glow a corresponding red.

With a hesitant finger, she reached out and pushed the lit panel. The door rumbled and then slowly began to ascend into the ceiling.

"Good to go," Daniera said. A dim corridor stretched ahead into darkness.

"Watch yourself," Love warned. "And I know it's tough, but let me do all the talking. Women are about a step above slaves in this hole and it can get a little rough."

Daniera paused, her eyes narrowing to slits. "So you've been here before, huh?"

"Yeah, but not for pleasure. One of my acquaintances owns the place."

She put her hands on her hips and glowered. "Then you knew how to get inside all along?"

Love merely grinned at her and then stepped into the Vortex.



Daniera was still blustering as they entered a circular greeting chamber. A large black podium was the only furniture in the shadowy room, though a dozen velvety curtains led to places unknown.

A greasy-looking Twi'lek clad in an expensive black cloak stood behind the podium, eyeing Daniera with a voracious stare.

Daniera leaned over to whisper, "Is it me or does this species seem to just churn out slimy servitors?"

Love grinned and added in a loud voice, "Every good little Twi'lek dreams of growing up to be a majordomo for some galactic sleaze-merchant. Isn't that right, Vab?"

"Love. I can't tell you how happy I am to see you," Vab D'Buula snarled, "Because I'm not." The Twi'lek returned his hungry gaze to Daniera, baring yellowed incisors and a pustulated tongue. "However it was extremely kind of you to bring me dessert."

Daniera recoiled from the hideous attendant, but Love walked right up to lean his elbows on the podium. "The only thing you're going to be feasting on is your own head-tails unless you tell me which curtain that space slug Mah-Luu is cowering behind."

Unimpressed, Vab reared to his full height. "Do you have an appointment to see the master?"

"Sure." Love reached into his coat. "Here you go."

Vab found himself staring down the very large barrel of Love's very, very heavy blaster pistol. Love put a tiny bit of pressure on the trigger, causing the overpowered weapon to emit an intimidating

whine as it charged to fire.

Vab only had to consider the offer for a microsecond. "Curtain number three. Third door to your right."

Love grinned and as he passed Vab gave the Twi'lek a friendly pat on the shoulder, causing the attendant to noticeably cringe.

Daniera caught up to Love as he drew aside the third curtain. "That was pretty good. Remind me not to play you at sabacc, I'd never know when you were bluffing."

"I wasn't." He nodded back at Vab. "Last time he spent three weeks in a bacta tank."

"I can't believe you."

"You do what you must to get the job done," he said, placing a hand on her shoulder, which she immediately shrugged off. "Listen, girl. Things are going to get intense in there." He nodded to the door down the hall. "Luu-Mah 'Thermal' Mah-Luu likes to keep his guests off-balance."

After checking the blaster pack, Love finally slipped the gun back into its holster. "Don't want to appear rude, though..."

As they continued down the hall, Daniera asked, "What in the name of Byss is that cannon you carry, anyway?"

"Well, in addition to having an amazing olfactory and auditory abilities, we Latarzians are also highly adept weaponsmiths. Our soul weapons are more than merely guns, they are statements of who we are." He glanced back at her, a bit embarrassed. "But I won't bore you with our silly little customs." He paused for a long moment, then handed her the gun like a cadet offering his weapon for inspection. "Base Calban Model X Heavy Blaster Pistol, with added side blaster sight, galven pattern upgrade, energy converter valve adjustment, and half a dozen other little tweaks that few people know about."

Daniera turned the bulky weapon over in her hands, nodding in appreciation. "It's amazing."

Love beamed like a proud father. "I'm thinking of adding a droid brain and vocabulator."

The Ubese businessman was holding a silver sphere in his hands, universally recognized as a thermal detonator.

She handed it back. "A talking gun?"

"Yeah," he said as he holstered the blaster. "Neat, huh?"

Daniera could only shake her head. "Oh well. You know what they say...big gun, little—"

"Problem hitting the target," Love interjected as they arrived at the correct door. He reached for the control panel, but she abruptly stopped him.

"Hold on a sec," Daniera narrowed her eyes to slits. "Why do they call him 'Thermal'?"

"Oh. You'll see."



Daniera should have been very comfortable. She was seated in a plush replihide chair, the air filter controls were at the perfect setting, and she was sipping from a warm mug of juice (well, holding it on the saucer in her lap because the last time she took a drink, her hand was shaking too badly to successfully dock with her lips).

She glanced sideways at Love, who was seated beside her, but his attention was focused on the obese Ubese behind the unique desk. It was apparently constructed purely of fused bone matter. Daniera counted over two dozen different species represented. And as if that wasn't quite disturbing enough, she now knew how Mah-Luu had earned his nickname.

The Ubese businessman was holding a silver sphere in his hands, universally recognized as a thermal detonator. Mah-Luu was playing with it, like a being with a nervous habit. Only this habit was making Daniera nervous.

Mah-Luu would slide the firing trigger into position, arming the device's built-in six-second delay. Then a few seconds later, he would thumb the trigger back into its original position, deactivating the device. Unfortunately, at times, Mah-Luu would get lost in thought or caught up in the conversation and his finger would stay slid into the armed position.

Time would tick down quickly and Daniera would hold her breath and prepare to get acquainted with her long-gone ancestors, but then the deactivation would come within what she was sure was the last fraction of a microsecond.

If that wasn't bad enough, Mah-Luu had a tendency to giggle at inopportune times, such as when no one had made a joke. Daniera

hoped the Ubese had a malfunction in his vocalizer that was causing the outbursts. Either way, from what she had seen so far, "Thermal" Mah-Luu was altogether not the sort of being you would ever want holding a thermal detonator under any circumstances, except possibly if you happened to be really far, far away...as in the next galaxy.

Actually, Daniera wasn't sure what bothered her more, the thermal detonator or the fact that Love didn't seem the least bit perturbed by its presence.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Love held up the Darth Vader figurine.

Mah-Luu merely shrugged. "Plenty of guests keep souvenirs. I can hardly be expected to recall every being who crosses the threshold of my fine establishment."

"Why not?" Love demanded to know. "You probably have vid cameras rolling 36 hours a day for future blackmail purposes."

"You wound me," Mah-Luu said, switching on the detonator. "Come now, you know I cannot reveal the membership of my club



under any circumstances. That's bad business. And my sort of bad business is only good for getting you dead." He started giggling, then switched off the device. Just as abruptly, he re-activated the timer. "Not to mention, I have certain ethical responsibilities as the owner of this establishment. A bond with my customers. One of trust and mutual confidence that what occurs within these walls never sees the harshly judgmental light of day." When he finished his soliloquy, the detonator was returned to standby mode.

"I already know that the being in question had a membership. I even know why. I could smell the cheap perfume from one of your girls all over him."

Daniera's eyes widened, but she remained silent.

Mah-Luu leaned his bulk forward. The detonator was switched on.... "Then why, pray tell, are you here, Love?"

"I want to see the girl."

"It'll cost you just like everyone else."

"Fine." Love reached into a pocket.

The Ubese's finger hovered anxiously over the still-active trigger.

Love held up a cred stick.

The detonator switched off. Mah-Luu held out a corpulent hand for the stick and carefully studied the amount held inside. His giggle broke the silence.

On went the detonator. Away went Daniera's breath.

Love locked eyes with Mah-Luu and a noiseless test of wills seemed to stretch on for too many seconds.

Off went the detonator. "Who?"

"Senator Luralon Odaay."

"Ah, yes. The Turian." Mah-Luu touched a recessed button under his desk and the door swung open. "Thermal" gave a high-pitched giggle. "He just loved Induki."

"I bet he did."

The cred stick vanished out of sight, but the Ubese still played with the detonator.

Love walked to the door, shadowed by Daniera. "So much for those pesky ethics," he said.

"I have to hand it you, Love. You are still pretty good at what you do...for your age, that is."

Love glared at him. "Is this the part where you give me the recruitment speech?" Mah-Luu giggled at that. "You? Hah! I'd as soon hire a Luudrian lockjaw. At least when its eyes turned red, I'd know it was going to turn on me. I doubt you come with any similar

safety features." The Ubese focused his gaze on Daniera. "Your companion doesn't say much...I like that in a female." The Ubese leered at her. "What do you say, sweetmeat? Looking for a job?"

Already annoyed at having had to play the subservient mute, Daniera strode back to the desk and pointed her hold-out right at Mah-Luu's head. "Are you looking for a third eye?"

The Ubese merely tittered even louder. "Oooh. Feisty, too! I must have her. Come on, Love...how much?"

"She's not for sale, 'Thermal'. And even if she was..."

Daniera gave him a look over her shoulder.

"...You couldn't afford her in a million years," Love hurriedly finished.

Mah-Luu looked annoyed as he tossed the cred stick back at Love. "Even trade. Her for Induki."

Love shook his head. "That's not an offer."

"You're right," Mah-Luu said, triggering the detonator. "It isn't."

Two burly Rodian bodyguards appeared at the door, dressed in scarlet-colored cloaks and brandishing blaster carbines.

Love glared at Mah-Luu. "We had a deal!"

"So much for those pesky ethics," Mah-Luu giggled as he switched off the detonator.

Daniera had not moved her weapon. "In case you forgot, there's a blaster pointed at your head."

Mah-Luu chuckled, nodding to his guards. "And one pointed at each of yours. With reinforcements on the way. Not the best odds."

Love's right hand was snaking into his coat as he talked. "I always prefer to play the hand I'm dealt."

"Too bad I don't feel the same way." "Thermal" began to chortle wildly. "House rules, you know." He touched a bloated finger to another button under his desk, opening a comm-line. "Vab, take Induki for a vacation. Now."

Daniera locked eyes with Love. He gave her a quick wink and then suddenly dropped like a wounded bantha, landing flat on his back. The heavy blaster was already cradled in his hands and before the first guard could lower his own weapon to draw a bead on the now-prone enemy, Love pulled the trigger.

A deafening roar echoed through the room as a pulsing blaster bolt exploded into the Rodian merc, knocking him off his feet and more than a meter backwards. The guard slammed into the wall and crumpled to the ground, his chest smoldering and blackened.

Without taking her eyes off Mah-Luu, Daniera whipped her gun

arm around and snapped off three rapid shots into the remaining merc.

Mah-Luu tried scrambling to his feet, but Daniera already had the barrel of the gun re-trained on him. "Oo-ta goo-ta, Tubbo?"

Love grinned as he joined Daniera.

"Rescind that last order," she demanded. "Tell Vab to bring Induki in here."

The Ubese merchant sneered at her. "Surely you wouldn't shoot an unarmed man...."

"No," Love answered for Daniera, "but I would." And he unceremoniously shot Mah-Luu point-blank in the chest.

Daniera cried out in shock, spinning around to face Love. "Love, you are a maniac!"

"Thank you."

"How could you—"

"Relax, sweets," Love said as he twisted a knob on his blaster back to its original setting. "This thing does have a stun setting, you know."

She looked back at "Thermal", who had flopped back into his chair and was on the starspeeder to unconsciousness.

"Great, but what about Induki?"

Love suddenly cocked his head to the side. There was the distinct whine of repulsorlift vehicles close by.

Before Daniera could even open her mouth, Love started for the door. He paused in the hallway for a split second, then hurried back into the room and punched the stunned Mah-Luu in the stomach. The thermal detonator in the Ubese's hand popped up into the air, and Love easily plucked the device from its ascent. He then spun on his heel and sprinted out into the hall.

Daniera was right behind him. "Love, you are certifiable!"

"Thank you."

She gestured frantically. "That way is a dead end. We've got to go back the other—"

The words died on her lips as she heard the sound of many booted feet approaching from that very direction. "Love! We're about to have some company."

Love was still running for the wall at full speed even as he thumbed the switch to activate the thermal detonator. He sent the device spinning ahead of him and began to count out loud the six-second timer delay.

Closing in from behind, Daniera realized what he was doing.

"Stay out of the blast sphere, you lunatic!"

Love waved in annoyance back at her. He had been pacing his run all along and she was disrupting his counting.

"Two. One!" Love cried just as the silver sphere clinked against the wall far ahead of him. There was a small flash and then the detonator's particle field expanded outward at blinding speed and the blast sphere vaporized the wall, most of the ceiling, and part of the floor.

With the newly created observation platform, Love and Daniera had an unobstructed view of the proceedings occurring in the alley below.

A struggling young girl was being dragged into a waiting speeder truck by two more of Mah-Luu's scarlet-cloaked Rodian enforcers. Three rickety-looking speeder bikes, each carrying a Rodian rider, were warming up alongside the speeder truck.

Of course, everyone was now looking up at Love and Daniera in complete surprise. The amazement was temporary. The two mercs hustled Induki inside and the speeder truck abruptly made tracks into the Undercity, followed by one of the bikes. The Rodians on the remaining two bikes took aim with their blaster carbines.

Love was already pulling out his hand-held blaster artillery. He quickly aimed and fired twice. The roaring bolts missed their mark, but Love was sure the mercs were having second thoughts about engaging in a prolonged firefight.

The heavy blaster whined loudly as it recharged, and the lead Rodian took the opportunity to engage in a hasty retreat while his buddy lagged back to provide some cover fire.

Daniera clipped off a half-dozen shots at the lead bike, but the range on her hold-out was limited at best. Most of the blasts fell far short of their mark, so she turned her attention to the remaining Rodian.

Love took careful aim and sent another thunderous blast hurtling toward the departing merc. The shot hit the speeder bike's rear, the concussive force spinning the vehicle 180 degrees and right into the side of a crumbling building nearby. The colorful explosion sent fiery debris raining down over the area.

The second rider wasn't sticking around for another demonstration, but just as he started moving, three of Daniera's crimson bolts slammed into his back. The impacts blew the Rodian right off his vehicle. The now riderless bike shuddered to a quick stop as the automatic kill-switch engaged, leaving the vehicle hovering mo-



tionless above the ground.

Love immediately took a running jump off the ragged ledge. He dropped toward the bike and landed with surprising grace atop the empty seat. After taking a second to be impressed with himself, he turned back to shout up to Daniera. "I'll be back for you!"

Love was shocked, however, to see she was no longer atop the ledge. Then he was jostled forward as Daniera landed on the seat behind him.

He turned to look at her with complete astonishment.

Daniera merely slapped his shoulder and barked, "Just shut up and drive this thing."

"Yes, ma'am!" he laughed and gunned the bike's powerful engine.

"You know something, Love, you are crazier than a berserk bantha!"

"Thank you."



"There they are," Daniera shouted.

"I see them." Love quickly accelerated, at the same time dipping the nose of the bike to avoid a large elevated crosswalk blocking their path.

The speeder truck had lost most of its head start in the twisting maze of decay that was Coruscant's Undercity. The vehicle's size and bulk were hindrances in the ancient highways and twisting corridors. Here the bikes held the distinct advantage.

Love deftly maneuvered the speeder bike through the chaotic jumble of fallen girders, crumbling walls, and overgrown toadstools. Daniera continued taking potshots at the remaining Rodian, who could not shake the tenacious pair from his tail.

The merc twisted around to fire off a blast from his carbine, but the shot went wide. It did, however, slow him down enough for Love to pull even with it.

Love one-handed the bike and reached for his pistol, but before he could even slide it from the holster, Daniera let out a strangled cry.

Love whipped his head around to see if she'd been hit, just in time watch her leap from their bike onto the rear of the merc's. It was a close call as to who was more stunned, Love or the Rodian....

"No riders," Daniera grunted and slammed the butt of her hold-

out against the merc's neck. Before the dazed Rodian could react, she shoved him off the bike...and into a rotting compost pile below.

There were many, many things in the galaxy that Love did not like. Being ignored was definitely one of them.

Love exchanged a look with Daniera, who pulled her bike back alongside his. "Remind me not to upset you."

"Too late," Daniera grinned as she gunned the bike and tore after the speeder truck.



They found the speeder truck in a dimly lit alleyway a few hundred meters away. Completely powered down, the vehicle was ominously silent.

Both Love and Daniera dismounted and made a careful approach.

The only noise was from the drizzling downpour that suddenly erupted overhead...the Undercity's micro-climates of rising air and condensing moisture often created tiny rainstorms where one would least expect them.

Love wrinkled his nose. The air was thick with the smell of rotting garbage, corroded metal and stagnant water. There was one other odor that Love instantly recognized....

"Stay here a minute," he ordered.

Daniera was about to argue, but saw the look in his eyes. She nodded quietly. And the rain quietly drizzled down around her.



Love pried open the side door and stepped inside, blaster at the ready. The two Rodian mercs were both slumped over in the cockpit, each one bearing a point-blank blaster hit to the back of the head.

He carefully continued to the back of the truck, and found her sprawled across the floor. Love knelt next to Induki's body. The

girl was very beautiful, and younger than he'd originally thought.

Love traced a finger over the gold-handled vibroblade stuck in her chest. He leaned down, closing his eyes for a moment as he took a whiff of the dead girl's perfume....

Then he knew.

Love heard a strangled gasp and looked up as Daniera finally entered.

After taking a moment to compose herself, she asked, "Grieve was already here?"

"Probably inside the whole time. Cleaning up his mess." Love stood back up. "It was sloppy to leave witnesses in the first place."

"What do you mean?"

Love tossed her a cred stick. Daniera's eyes widened as she read the amount. "This was in her pocket. Grieve probably paid her to take Odaay to the Kaerlia Queen, although obviously the Senator didn't get what he paid for...."

"But why would Grieve suddenly alter his habits? The blasts those Rodians took don't appear to be generated by the same weapon." She gestured at Induki's body. "And the girl was actually killed with the vibroblade."

Love passed her as he exited the truck. "Well, you're half right."

"What?"

Love stepped outside into the rank alley, brushing the raindrops that quickly accumulated on his coat. "That was definitely a standard blaster wound. Very standard. As in issue." He flipped one leg over his speeder bike. "And the girl wasn't killed by any sharp weapon, at least not the most obvious one."

"You've completely lost me."

Love shrugged as the bike began to power up. "It's hard to follow in the footsteps of genius."

Daniera mounted her own bike, pushing her damp hair out of her eyes. "So where is it leading us now?"

"I have to confirm a suspicion of mine."

"Then let's go."

Love shook his head. "I need you to go back to Cracken's office. Scan the NRI's reports on all of the victims."

"Our best analysis specialists have poured over those files since this mess began. What makes you think—"

"Concentrate on the toximorphic screens," Love interrupted. "Don't tell anyone what you're doing, understand? And then meet me at the Hold-Out in 45 minutes." With that, he roared away into

the shadows.

Daniera's gaze remained on Love's retreating form, then slowly shifted back to the speeder truck. "That's not all I intend to check on."



Daniera slipped into General Cracken's chair. Technically only the General was allowed to use the computer; however, it was an unwritten rule of Cracken's that any time one of his favored NRI agents needed, they could use the powerful machine.

It only took a few minutes for the speedy computer to find the data she wanted. She studied the toximorphic test findings from all of Grieve's victims, but found nothing out of the ordinary. With a shrug, she copied the information into her own datapad.

Daniera prepared to leave, but paused and then sat back down. She began an information search on M'Kyas Love. As she expected, the files were password-encrypted. The NRI's business was keeping secrets, after all. It would be a major policy violation, possibly enough to get her terminated, but she just had to know. Breaking the files then and there would take too long, so...using her datapad link, Daniera also transferred Love's personnel files into her datapad and put her built-in decryption unit to work on them.

She slid the small datapad back into her jacket and switched off Cracken's computer, plunging the room into darkness.



Love squeezed through the happy hour crowd and leaned against the bar. After some prudent use of elbow, he managed to clear out a little breathing room. Though considering the various odors emanating from the patrons of the Hold-Out (named for the leading cause of death in the joint), that wasn't necessarily a good thing.

The bartender was busy scrubbing a glass as if his very life depended on it, and the man had yet to even look in Love's direction.

Love cleared his throat with Hutt-like intensity but succeeded only in drawing a few looks of annoyance from the drunks seated

around him. It seemed that if you weren't a regular here, you were viewed with as much warmth as womp rat droppings on a freshly buffed hull.

The bartender's head remained down and the glass was quickly becoming the cleanest object in the entire cantina.

There were many, many things in the galaxy that Love did not like. Being ignored was definitely one of them.

Love slid one hand back over his coat, casually displaying the massive blaster cradled in a replihide shoulder holster. "Who do you have to kill to get a drink around here?"

Silence.

Then someone (obviously unconcerned about personal safety) rudely tapped Love on the shoulder.

Love slowly swiveled his head around.

"I don't like you," hissed a one-horned Devaronian with breath that could drop a bantha at ten meters.

"Yeah, yeah..." Love returned his attention to the bartender. "Save it for the next farmboy, pal. I'm really thirsty right now."

"I have the death mark on..."

"Four systems? Five? Great. Congratulations. Your maternal unit must be very proud. Now do us both a favor and jump yourself out of my personal space." Love shook his head in disgust. "Have you even showered since the Old Republic?"

Love glanced back at the entrance and checked his chronometer. A microsecond later Daniera walked in, right on time, but she didn't look happy.

Her lips parted and Love had the sudden image of turbolaser batteries charging up. He was bracing himself for the worst when Daniera's mouth abruptly shut and a well-manicured hand slid into her jacket.

Love's trusty gut told him he was about to be shot. "Dani—" Right idea. Wrong direction.

A hold-out blaster jabbed intrusively at the back of Love's head. The Devaronian's fetid breath washed over him.

Love smiled at Daniera as if nothing was wrong. "About time you got here. I was beginning to think you weren't gonna show."

Daniera's eyes widened in surprise. She continued toward him, but did not draw her weapon. "Wouldn't miss it for the world."

Love grinned as his left hand slithered in the direction of his powerful blaster. "I knew it...sooner or later you'll fall for me."

The Devaronian was annoyed, jabbing the hold-out into Love's

skull to get his attention. "Idiot! Did you happen to notice I am about to kill you?"

"Actually," Love said as he squeezed the trigger of his still-holstered pistol. "No."

The pulsing blaster bolt erupted from the barrel, tore a ragged hole through the back of Love's coat, then caught the Devaronian square in the chest.

The concussive force blew the alien across the room. The crowd scurried out of the way as the Devaronian came crashing back down between two tables. The impact shattered chairs, sent meals flying everywhere way, and launched an expensive bottle of Cassandran Choholl toward the bar.

Love tracked the spinning bottle, smoothly snatching it from mid-air.

He raised the Choholl in a toast, then triumphantly put the bottle to his lips. There was a short pause. He shook it once, twice. Not a drop left.

Love sighed, tossing the empty container over his shoulder.

There was an odd ringing sound followed by a jarring thump and the soft tinkle of breaking glass.

Love slowly turned around.

Not coincidentally, the bartender had vanished from sight.

Love leaned over the bar to take a look and winced.

Everyone in the cantina was now staring at him.

"So," Love asked, "who else do you have to kill to get a drink around here?"

As if on cue, an entire table of scarlet-cloaked Rodians stood up and took aim with nasty-looking blaster carbines.

Love paused, looking rather nonplussed. "Uh, that was more of a rhetorical question."

Daniera stepped beside him. "Those look like more of Mah-Luu's hired goons!"

"Oh yeah...did I forget to mention he owns this place, too?"

The other patrons had sidled away, leaving Love and Dani exposed. Even drunks know trouble when they see it.

"Then why in the name of Byss did you want to meet here?"

"I just told you." Love's hand was a blur as he tossed a small vial through the air. Blue-tinted liquid sloshed inside as it spun gracefully through the air and landed amidst the Rodians. The vial shattered, spraying the mercs. One second they were standing there ready to shoot...the next second, all six had hit the floor,

apparently dead.

Daniera just stared. "Love, you are a living manifestation of the dark side."

"Thank you."

Daniera carefully walked over to the bodies.

"Don't worry. That stuff evaporates in a second or two after being exposed to a non-liquid medium. Like the air. Of course, it does its job in a quarter of that time."

She touched the toe of her boot to the broken vial. "What is it?"

"A highly concentrated derivative of the Fex-M3 nerve toxin. They call it Blue-8118 because of the color of its liquid agent. Once introduced into the bloodstream, death follows in microseconds."

Daniera look back at him. "But the Rodians didn't have it injected...."

"Exactly. But Blue-8118 is so powerful, mere contact with the skin is enough to cause a massive systemic overload that shuts down the body." Love grinned. "They should be up and about in ten minutes or so, but I wouldn't wish that bodyache on anybody."

"Where did you get it?"

Love nodded his head toward the bar. "I just picked up my order in the back room. And I'm not the only one who made a recent purchase."

"Grieve." Daniera stared at him. "But how did you know?"

"I didn't. I suspected." Love joined Daniera, picking up a piece of the vial. "I smelled something exotic on Odaay's body. Very sweet and flowery. At first I assumed it was a girl's perfume, probably Induki's; but when we found her it wasn't the same. But I detected the same sickly-sweet smell on her, too."

Love sniffed the vial and then held it out to Daniera. She took a cautious whiff, eyes widening. "The Blue-8118...."

"I guarantee if you check the bodies for that specific genetic sample, there'll be trace elements of the poison in each victim's bloodstream."

"But how was it introduced? The vibroblades?"

"No. This stuff is too fragile. Even with a liberal coating of the Blue-8118, the air would have eaten it away. There had to be a more precise delivery system." Love held up a tiny, near-transparent dart. "I pulled this out of Induki. Apparently her killer didn't have time to cover up his handiwork this time with us on his trail."

"That explains the huge blaster holes in the other victims. Grieve was trying to get rid of the evidence." Daniera shook her head. "It

all fits, but it doesn't make any sense. Why would Grieve suddenly change his methods?"

"He didn't." Love started for the door, glancing back over his shoulder. "You know, when you first came in I thought you were going to shoot me."

"Why?"

Love continued out the door. "Oh, no reason."

"This is an excellent bit of detective work, Love, but we're still no closer to our killer."

"Wrong again." He glanced at his chronometer. "I better get going."

"Where?"

"There's an assassination attempt masquerading as a charity ball that I have to attend."

"You mean *we*, don't you?"

Love touched her arm and smiled. "No."

Daniera suddenly felt light-headed. She glanced down at her arm, and the blue liquid smeared there by Love's gloved fingertip.

"Love, you are a—" Her next words faded away with her consciousness and her last memory before the blackness engulfed her was the sound of Love's voice....

"Thank you."



Daniera finally awoke to the piercing beep emitted by her jacket. Still groggy and aching all over, she fumbled with her datapad. The screen read: "decryption complete."

She touched the pad and waited for the results to appear.

Moments later, the datapad tumbled from her shaking fingers. Daniera was already sprinting to her speeder bike before the pad had even hit the ground.



The Grand Ballroom of the Imperial Palace was filled to absolute capacity. Moving around in the dense crowd required patience, good timing, and prudent use of elbows. By all appearances, the Maltesara Masquerade Benefit was going to be a rousing success.

The elite of Coruscant were all in attendance: politicians, businessmen, society matrons, and even some alien royalty. Vivid costumes and extravagant masks lent an air of colorful elegance to the proceedings.

The New Republic Defense Force personnel stationed around the ballroom were unobtrusive but highly vigilant, as were the costumed NRI agents scattered throughout the crowd.

The thunderous echoes of conversation and laughter suddenly died down at the blaring of regal synth-horns. All eyes focused on the towering double doors of the ballroom's main entrance as they slowly parted.

The Chief of State finally made her entrance, attended by a phalanx of Defense Force guards dressed in bulky ceremonial armor. Leia Organa Solo looked resplendent in a simple ivory gown, star ruby medallion, and an intricate Alderaanian vizard mask. She began the long journey to the podium, moving down the long greeting line of important guests.

"New Republic Security!"
Daniera
screamed at
the top of her
lungs. "Every-
body down!"



Down near the end of the greeting line, General Cracken stood at attention, patiently awaiting the Chief of State. Beside him, Cabe adjusted his mask.

"I wonder where they could be," Cracken asked.

"Daniera had better be okay," Cabe said. "I trust that Love about as much as a wampa in a tauntaun pen."

"I have every confidence in him," Cracken glanced nervously at his chronometer. "Well...I used to."



Tucked in the shadows of a large column 20 meters from the receiving line, Love watched the proceedings silently. As the Chief

Paul Danner of State moved closer, he slid the heavy blaster from its holster. He noted with satisfaction that the weapon was fully charged.

Good.

Because he was probably only to get one shot at this, and he'd have to make it count.



Daniera ignored the ache gripping her body and sprinted through the palace hall toward the Grand Ballroom. Defense Force guards stationed at the entrance reached for their blaster rifles as they saw her wild approach.

She slowed down a bit as she reached the bio and weapon scanners. Daniera hurriedly waved her identification with one hand and lifted her jacket to show them the holstered hold-out.

"This is an emergency. The Chief of State's life is in grave danger!"

The guards exchanged glances....



Leia Organa Solo had just about reached the end of the line. Luckily, her mask hid the relief on her face. She endured the overly eager compliments of the prex of Taldan Enterprises, reminding herself as she had done a thousand times tonight that it was all for charity.

As the businessman rambled on, she absently fingered the small star ruby set in the gold medallion. It had been a last-minute gift from a secret admirer, which was unusual to say the least. But it was so beautiful, she could hardly resist. Besides, it wasn't a good idea to offend a contributor the day of a charity ball.

She turned and offered a genuine smile to her next admirer...General Cracken.



Love stepped from the shadows and moved through the crowd, the heavy blaster held low by his thigh as he approached the

greeting line from the opposite side.

There she was. Love was surprised how beautiful Leia looked up close. She had certainly not lost the regal bearing of her days as a princess.

Her back was partially turned toward him, but Love could see that Leia had just extended a well-manicured hand to General Cracken, who bowed in gentleman-like fashion.

Love shouldered aside an obese Senator in stylized Tusken Raider garb and lifted the heavy blaster pistol....



Daniera pushed her way inside the ballroom, passing the podium as she headed for the receiving line. She already had the hold-out in her hands as she hurriedly scanned the crowd. Then she saw it....

The Chief of State was greeting Cracken, but neither the General nor Cabe, who stood rigidly beside him, could see Love emerge from the crowd across the way. Organa Solo was blocking their view of Love as he took aim with his blaster.

"New Republic Security!" Daniera screamed at the top of her lungs. "Everybody down!"



Love's finger began to squeeze the trigger. Just a few more seconds....

When he heard Daniera's yell, he couldn't believe his ears. Then his sight was the next sense called into question as he saw her break through the crowd, blaster aimed right at him!

"Dani?"

The blaster bolt caught him in the right shoulder, spinning him off-balance and onto the ground. His heavy blaster skittered across the floor.

The stunned crowd had gone deathly silent except for a scattering of screams.

The guards quickly formed a protective shield around the Chief of State. Cracken drew his own blaster, pushing ahead to get a better view of what was going on around him. Cabe remained where he was, flanking the guards behind Organa Solo.

"What are you doing?" Cracken yelled at Daniera, who was standing over the fallen Love, her blaster pointed right at his head.

She spared the approaching General a quick glance. "Arresting Grandyl Grieve for the attempted murder of the Chief of State!"

Love looked up at her in complete shock. "What? It's not me—" He pointed an accusing finger. "It's him!"

All eyes turned to the location that Love was gesturing.

Cabe stood there grinning, a small dart shooter tucked in the palm of his hand and pointed right at Leia Organa Solo. "Too late, I'm afraid," he said and squeezed the trigger.

"Cabel!" Daniera screamed. "No!"

Both Cracken and Daniera opened fire, knocking Cabe to the ground, but it was too late. The dart hurtled unerringly toward the Chief of State.

The room had once again plunged into deathly silence, except for Love, who spoke a single word. "Shield."

The star ruby on Leia's medallion pulsated once.

One of her guards tried valiantly to step in front of her, but the tiny dart was much quicker.

The dart hit.

More accurately, it hit something, but it wasn't the Chief of State; the projectile bounced off an invisible barrier centimeters away from Organa Solo's skin. Its momentum irrevocably lost, the dart tumbled harmlessly to the floor.

From his prone position, the wounded Cabe roared in anger. He turned the dart shooter on Daniera and General Cracken. "Somebody's gonna die!"

The thunderous blast caught Cabe in the chest, driving him back across the floor and into a stone column. The would-be assassin slumped over, a massive smoking hole in his chest.

"Somebody always does." Love lowered the heavy blaster pistol and stumbled to his feet with Cracken's assistance. "Thanks, General."

Daniera merely stared at them. "But he's Grandyl Grieve. I saw his records!"

Cracken smiled. "You're right. But he has redeemed himself more times than I care to count. He's been working for us for years now."

"From Grieve to Love?"

Love smiled. "The General's idea. He enjoys his ironic twists."

"I suspected we had a mole in the NRI impersonating Grieve," Cracken said, "and who better to ferret out the fake Grieve than the real one?"



Love Is A Warm Blaster

"See?"

"I can't believe this," Daniera said.

"You can't believe it?" Love touched a hand to the small wound on his shoulder. "You shot me!"

"Well..." She thought for a second. "I told you not to call me Dani."

Cracken looked at Love. "What was the final tip-off?"

Love nodded his head toward Cabe's corpse. "He bought a Prax Arms Stealth 2VX palm shooter from my store a few minutes before Daniera came in to recruit me for this mission."

"And I'm certainly glad she did," Leia said.

The trio looked up as the Chief of State approached. She ran a hand over the medallion. "This is by far one of the best gifts I've ever received."

"One of my custom little creations," Love said proudly. "A miniature particle shield generator. Only works for a few seconds or so, but in this case it was all that was necessary."

"Thank you," Organa Solo said, eyeing them each in turn. "To all of you." Leia gave a curt bow. "Especially for livening up this event," she said with a wink then added, a little louder, "Now, if you'll

excuse me—”

As the Chief of State left them, Daniera glanced over. “Love, you are—”

Love braced himself.

“Actually, I’m not sure what you are,” she finished.

“Oh, I can tell you that,” he grinned, touching his thrumming pistol tenderly to his cheek. “Love is a warm blaster.”

Roleplaying Game Sourcefile

■ M’Kyas Love

Type: Retired NRI Agent

DEXTERITY 4D

Blaster 10D, brawling parry 5D, dodge 8D+1, grenade 8D, melee combat 6D, melee parry 5D, missile weapons 4D+2, thrown weapons 4D+2, vehicle blasters 5D

KNOWLEDGE 2D+1

Alien species 6D, bureaucracy 5D+2, cultures 4D+2, intimidation 8D, languages 5D, law enforcement 10D, planetary systems 5D, streetwise 8D, survival 6D+1, willpower 7D

MECHANICAL 2D

Astrogation 5D, repulsorlift operation 7D+1, space transports 5D, starship gunnery 4D

PERCEPTION 3D+2

Bargain 7D, command 6D, con 7D, hide 6D, investigation 10D, search 7D+1, sneak 5D+2

STRENGTH 3D

Brawling 6D, climbing/jumping 5D+1, stamina 7D

TECHNICAL 3D

Blaster repair 10D, computer programming/repair 5D, demolitions 4D+1, security 8D, space transports repair 6D

Special Abilities:

Auditory Sense: Latarzians have an extremely developed sense of hearing, able to detect sounds in high/low ranges that many other species cannot. This adds a +1D bonus to any



Perception skill rolls related to hearing.

Olfactory Sense: Latarzians also have an incredible sense of smell, able to discern and recognize odors with alarming ability. This gives a +1D bonus to any *Perception* skill rolls related to smell.

Force Points: 4

Dark Side Points: 2

Character Points: 32

Move: 10

Equipment: Custom heavy blaster pistol (7D), overcoat, replihide blaster holster, chronometer

Capsule: One of the more notorious agents to serve New Republic Intelligence, M’Kyas Love is something of a legend in Intelligence

circles. He is what they call an "X" agent: ex-skip tracer, ex-private investigator, ex-bounty hunter, and ex-Sector Ranger. Love was most recently ex-New Republic Intelligence, though no one knows why he left. His service files were sealed and his past history classified at the highest levels.

Love may very well have been one of the best at tracking down Imperial agents and stopping them no matter the cost. He is certainly relentless, tenacious, and possessed of more willpower than a dozen beings put together. The problem is that Love is a jerk, a scoundrel, a rogue. Brash, egotistical, and temperamental, Love often worked solo because no one could stand to be partnered with him.

Eventually Love realized he was tired of playing the game that he had once enjoyed so much and left the NRI to open his own weapon shop on Coruscant. There, Love is free to build, repair, and modify his cherished custom creations, not to mention sell them for top credit.

■ **M'Kyas Love's Heavy Blaster Pistol "Ventilator"**

Model: Modified Calban Model X Blaster Pistol

Type: Modified heavy blaster pistol

Scale: Character

Skill: Blaster

Cost: Not for sale

Availability: Unique

Fire Rate: 1/2

Range: 3-6/20/40

Damage: 7D

Capsule: M'Kyas Love has modified his personal weapon with a variety of improvements: side-mounted blaster sight, galven pattern upgrade, some adjustments to the energy converter valve, and dualistic static pulse adaptors. While these improve the overall power of the weapon's energy burst, they cumulatively reduce the range; of course, Love conducts most of his business at close range, anyway.

■ **Daniera Karmony**

Type: NRI Special Agent

DEXTERITY 3D+1

Blaster 5D+2, dodge 5D

KNOWLEDGE 3D+2

Bureaucracy 5D, languages 4D+1, law enforcement 5D, streetwise 5D+2

MECHANICAL 2D+1

Repulsorlift operation 4D, sensors 4D+1

PERCEPTION 3D+1

Bargain 4D, con 5D, hide 4D, investigation 5D, search 4D+2, sneak 4D+1

STRENGTH 2D+1

Brawling 3D+1

TECHNICAL 3D

Computer programming/repair 7D, security 5D

Force Points: 1

Character Points: 12

Move: 10

Equipment: Jacket, datapad, NRI Identification, hold-out blaster (3D+2), chronometer



Capsule: Daniera Karmony is a young, up-and-coming agent in New Republic Intelligence. Highly regarded by her supervisors, Daniera has earned multiple commendations in her relatively short tenure with the NRI and caught the attention of General Alren Cracken himself.

She is intelligent, attractive, and cool. Her analytic ability and computer proficiency are amazing considering her age. With more experience, Daniera could be one of the best and brightest operatives in the New Republic. As such, Cracken has taken Daniera under his wing, challenging her with advanced missions to see just how good the girl really is.

■ Cabe Maquez

Type: Imperial Double-Agent Assassin

DEXTERITY 2D+2

Blaster 7D+1, brawling parry 5D, dodge 5D, melee combat 4D+2, missile weapons 6D

KNOWLEDGE 3D+2

Bureaucracy 5D, intimidation 6D, streetwise 5D+2, survival 4D+1

MECHANICAL 3D

Repulsorlift operation 4D+2, sensors 5D, starship gunnery 4D, starship shields 4D+2

PERCEPTION 2D+1

Con 7D+2, forgery 4D+2, persuasion 5D, search 5D, sneak 6D

STRENGTH 3D+1

Brawling 5D+2, climbing/jumping 4D

TECHNICAL 3D

Computer programming/repair 5D+2, first aid 3D+2, security 5D+2

Dark Side Points: 2

Character Points: 12

Move: 10

Equipment: NRI identification, blaster pistol (4D), Prax Arms Stealth 2VX palm dart shooter, nerve toxin darts



Capsule: Major Cabe Maquez is another member of the New Republic Defense Force on the fast-track to success. He has recently been serving as a security liaison to General Cracken. Cabe is bright, charming, and a quick learner.

Unfortunately, no one knows Cabe is using his talents for the benefit

of the Empire. He is an accomplished assassin and he is currently taking contracts on New Republic officials.

■ **Luu-Mah "Thermal" Mah-Luu**

Type: Ubese Entrepreneur

DEXTERITY 3D

Blaster 4D, grenade 6D, grenade: thermal detonator 9D

KNOWLEDGE 3D

Alien species 5D, business 7D, cultures 5D, intimidation 9D, law enforcement 6D, streetwise 8D, survival 6D

MECHANICAL 2D

PERCEPTION 3D+1

Bargain 5D, command 6D, con 7D, persuasion 5D

STRENGTH 3D

Brawling 4D+2, lifting 5D

TECHNICAL 3D+2

Computer programming/repair 5D, demolitions 9D+1

Special Abilities:

Survival: "True Ubese" get a +2D bonus to their *survival* skill due to the harsh conditions they are forced to endure on their homeworld.

Type II Atmosphere Breathing: "True Ubese" require adjusted breath masks to filter and breathe Type I atmospheres. Without the masks, they suffer a -1D penalty to all skills and attributes.

Force Points: 2

Dark Side Points: 8

Character Points: 21

Move: 8

Equipment: Breath mask with vocalizer/voice modulator, various thermal detonators, flowing robes

Capsule: Luu-Mah Mah-Luu isn't typical "True Ubese." He does not share their slight build (and that's being kind), he could care less about taking vengeance on the *yarak pootzck* Ubese, and his only love of technology comes in the form of the thermal detonator always in his grasp. Hence his nickname, "Thermal."

Mah-Luu is an entrepreneur in the loosest sense of the word. He owns many enterprises, gleefully counts his profits, and orders people around; however he has no love for any of his operations or operatives for that matter. He is in business for one reason and one reason only...to maximize his pleasures in life.

One of his favorites is intimidating others. "Thermal" sits behind a desk created entirely of fused bone matter. He is never without a thermal detonator in his hand (and at least three more somewhere about his person), which he gleefully switches on and off while speaking to people. Mah-Luu also tends to giggle a lot, often at extremely inappropriate moments. Overall, one gets the impression that Mah-Luu is not someone to annoy.

Mah-Luu's Muscle

Once in a great while, Mah-Luu's attempts at intimidation do not work. For these and other situations where a more direct approach is necessary, "Thermal" relies on depraved Rodian mercenaries of


the bloodthirsty Scarlet Guard. Mah-Luu has the group under contract and utilizes them in a variety of ways. Their tasks include bodyguarding "Thermal" and his guests, debt collection, and assassination.

Scarlet Guard Mercenaries. All stats are 2D except: *Dexterity 3D+1, blaster 5D, dodge 4D, Mechanical 2D+2, repulsorlift operation 3D+2, Strength 3D, brawling 4D.* Move: 10. Blaster carbine (5D), scarlet cloak, comlink.

"Thermal" Ventures

Mah-Luu owns a half-dozen businesses, most of which dabble (or plunge headlong) into criminal activity. Two of these nefarious enterprises are located on Coruscant:

- **Dark Vortex Club:** A veritable playground for the elite of Coruscant's underworld where anything can be bought or sold. This is where Mah-Luu keeps his office. His majordomo, the greasy Twi'lek called Vab D'Buula, organizes most of his affairs from here, too.
- **The Hold-Out:** This scummy dive doubles as a warehouse for black market goods. There are many secret storerooms hidden away in this establishment, and it doubles as the Scarlet Guard headquarters.



Mara's Back!

Join Mara Jade on a mission to save her captured crew. The nefarious Drach'nam slaver Chay Praysh and a corrupt industrialist pit themselves against the former Emperor's Hand in a struggle for a cutting edge freighter. Without Talon Karrde, Rebel allies, or the crew of the *Wild Karrde*, it's "Jade Solitaire," by *New York Times* best-selling author Timothy Zahn.

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